

# **The Gaze**

*Unfolding Realms of Enquiry*

**Ann Kristin Eide**



Dissertation for the degree doctor rerum politicarum (dr.polit.)  
at the University of Bergen

Norway 2008



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“Metamorphosis of Narcissus”. Salvador Dali 1937.  
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## Abstract

This text probes into the phenomenon of *seeking*, as it is narrated by, and manifesting itself among, people who have visited Norwegian Buddhist groups to various extent. Seeking may manifest itself in a multitude of activities, from meditation to yoga, Tai Chi, to different kinds of healing and to massages, as well as to general courses of “self development”. But seeking also goes beyond such tangible and observable activities. It embraces certain modes of reflecting on the self and the world as well as modes of enacting these reflections. This means that seeking transcends distinctions between the individual and society, as being a project whereby the individual can be understood as (re)creating her/himself as a socially constituted being. By probing into stories about seeking, this investigation wrestles with intersections between language and embodiment, and between social context and the individual. Seeking is used as a prism through which the analytical gaze is cast in a multitude of directions. The stories told by seekers are explored alongside the enterprise of making stories into objects of study as such: What we learn from stories will depend on what we believe stories to be in the first place. It depends on what realms of enquiry our analytical tools allow us to slice open.

By tracing the investigative procedure as a certain kind of gaze, one that makes objects of study crystallize, the project leads into a terrain where power-structures become visible. Much academic literature focuses on religious and spiritual matters in ways that *objectify* seeking – thereby emptying it of *what is at stake for the seeker*. The shopping metaphor that frequently characterises much academic literature, may illustrate this point. Questioning the shopping metaphor, this analysis investigates its conditions of emergence, and discerns certain renderings of seeking ( – and thereby also of the seekers – ) as products of the analytical process itself. The analytical process, alongside unspoken ontological and epistemological presuppositions, has the propensity of creating gaps between the knowledge produced by the investigator, and the knowledge the individual seeker has of what is at stake in her/his personal quest. This text points out and explores such gaps, directing attention towards the limits of our analytical tools.

The present study slices into analytical complexities from an angle where concrete immediacy and experience is made the methodological starting point. It does not claim to be making any exhaustive investigation: On the contrary, a central point is that there will always be more to reality than what we happen to have access to. But by extracting and annotating elements from

phenomenology, critical realism and narrative theory, conceptual tools are explored that may probe into life stories in ways that may better account for the imperatives behind their construction. Simultaneously, seeking in itself is revealed as a way of opening up realms of enquiry, of probing into questions of life and death. The informants as well as the researcher may be understood as engaging in processes of *unfolding*: Realms of enquiry, and lives to be lived. Acknowledging life stories as phenomena arising from bodies immersed in the world, a world that works upon the narrator as well as being worked upon, and last, but not least, where something is at stake for the storyteller, this dissertation explores, and argues for, the necessity of a *phenomenology of narratives*.



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# 1. Writing from the body

## 1.1 *First cut*

Writing carries its own imperatives. Even though I have written this text, the process of creation has also steered me, often in unforeseen directions. Writing is not just about putting together pieces that could have been put together differently. The parts also crystallize along the way, by the process of writing itself. Writing carries its own logic, far beyond genre rules. The first cut into any issue decides which realms of enquiry open up, and thus, for where one can end up. This opening chapter not only tells about the construction of a field, in the social anthropological sense. It also constitutes part of this construction, unfolding the very realms that are to be explored and developed in the chapters to come.

The year of 1992 was my *Annus Horribilis*. We all know that we eventually will die. But the intellectual knowledge of this fact is one matter. Quite another is the same knowledge arising from our own bodily experience: an encounter with the fragility of the body, a brush with death that cannot be forgotten just by returning to the normal routines of life. Twice in 1992 I almost bled to death on the operating table. The second time I was put in an artificially induced coma for 24 hours to immobilize me and stop the bloodshed. An artery had been cut open by mistake. Later this was discovered to have also created an aneurysm. An aneurysm is an area where the artery's tissue is weakened -- a little balloon that might burst, causing anything from a trickle of blood to severe hemorrhaging. Theoretically I can live my whole life without anything of this kind happening. But theoretically it might burst here and now. The older I get, the less elastic my tissue becomes, and the chance of a rupture increases. Christmas of 1992 I had to decide whether to undergo more surgery to block the aneurysm. This procedure in itself carries a small risk of blocking blood supply to parts of the brain, the worst case scenario potentially including paralyses. Nobody knows for sure, and nobody knows the extent of such side effects, should they occur. As my experience with unsuccessful surgery was already too extensive, I decided not to find out. My decision was made, and I returned to life outside of the hospital corridors.

But certain matters could not be left behind so easily. What I had been through had transformed my experience of life on many levels. I had acquired pituitary insufficiency, which meant that I was made dependent of lifelong hormonal substitution. I had to deal with changes in bodily constitution and functioning as well as the accumulation of shocking events. Old questions regarding my existence had now acquired an urgent relevance: What constitutes *me*, when my life depends on pills and shots, and I experience my whole world changing in minutes just by adjusting dosages? What are *my* feelings and *my* thoughts when a little hormonal pill can change it all? What should form the basis for the daily decisions I have to make? Is sadness, for instance, a sign of something wrong with a relationship of mine, or is it a sign of too little cortisone? These weren't just theoretical questions. In such cases I have to make the practical decision whether to end the relationship or whether to take more cortisone. An autonomous me did not exist. I had seemingly no control over my thoughts and feelings. Reality revealed itself as a relative phenomenon changing according to my hormonal levels: matter over mind. My whole identity seemed to shrivel, as I saw myself as some kind of Cyborg. Even the sustenance of my womanhood had become artificial: a hormone patch on my skin. My skin revealed its permeability, letting needles slide in to sustain life, and absorbing medication through patches and sprays. In a real, lived way, the idea of *me* was challenged. And in addition to the lifelong project of adapting to functional changes in my body, death was not something I could keep at a distance anymore. I had to find a way to live *with* death. No longer a peripheral vision, merely intellectual knowledge, death occupied my whole horizon. Life had become steeped in an unbearable impermanence. Conceiving of my body and life as shattered, I was trying to come to terms with the situation. I wanted to get back to the way my life used to be. But things would not get back to normal, no matter how hard I tried.

Such was my situation when, a few months later, I came across a novel (Brøgger 1994) that made a particular impression on me. I was touched the way reading a good book, or watching a well-made movie has the propensity to do. My grandfather supposedly used to say that the one who has read many books has lived many lives. This was a very perceptive observation. Reading a book is not just about relating to the words written. The words conjure up realities that you can be swept into. You may even identify with the main character to such an extent that you feel you become this person for a brief moment<sup>1</sup>. The élan of such an experience can go on coloring your world long after having left the movie theatre, or put aside the book.

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<sup>1</sup> "Reading involves becoming absorbed in the world of fiction, virtually exploring the experiences of the characters, inhabiting their virtual bodies and participating in their virtual encounters. Over time a mode of existence arises from the pages" (Steeves 2004:65).

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty claims that literature and philosophy “can no longer be separated”, because they are both involved in “formulating an experience of the world, a contact with the world which precedes thought about the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1964:28). I was deeply impressed by the mentioned novel, because its protagonist went through emotions I could identify with. What is more, the narrative added new aspects to the familiar: her experiences were presented as a journey, as revealing facets of life that otherwise would have remained hidden. In one scene the protagonist cries uncontrollably, an event that could easily be labeled as a breakdown. Instead, the book elaborates upon how certain mystics consider tears to be a gift of grace, as a sign of what was described as some kind of higher consciousness. Grief was presented as a blessing in itself.

Finding ideas interesting is not the same as uncritically embracing them. But I subscribe to the perspective Wikan represents when saying, “let us show enough humility toward other traditions of knowledge that we are open to the insights they teach, willing to learn general lessons from their insights and analysis of the human condition” (1990:282). You don’t have to travel to faraway countries to get in touch with other ways of understanding and approaching life. They can be encountered anywhere – even through a book, written by a Danish author. My problems were not resolved by reading this book, but I felt some kind of glow arising, something warm and intense infused my experience of life when reading. This experience triggered an eagerness for exploration. The issues addressed were relevant to my situation: every moment was introduced as carrying death within it. We are all dying, death is not the end of life, death is here and now, integrated in the very essence of life. Embracing life implies embracing change, embracing all the little deaths that continually take place as one moment replaces another. From this perspective the Gordian knot I was trying to disentangle did not exist, relating to death as an emotional reality was not contrary to living: embracing life *implied* embracing death.

The novel had elaborated upon the concept of impermanence with references to Buddhist philosophy, which gave me a point of departure for further exploration. I had no desire for religious conversion. But I had an interest in anything that might help me deal with issues that had become a matter of life and death to me. I looked up the Yellow Pages and found a Buddhist center in Oslo, where I lived at the time. A woman answered my call. From our conversation I learned that meditation for beginners was taught every Monday. The upcoming Monday, equipped with the travel directions given, I went there all by myself.

Seeds were sown for what would years later become the text I am writing here, a text where I will probe into themes derived from the events presented in this chapter.

I assume what Csordas calls “a methodological starting point in concrete immediacy rather than in abstract structure”<sup>2</sup> (1997:282). I write “from the body” (Csordas 2000:xi), in the sense that it is as an embodied and positioned being I will be approaching the experience of other human beings, equally embodied and positioned. Rather than presenting a *sui generis* object of study, I will make a point of thematizing its genesis. In this text I want to show how the investigative procedure in itself represents a certain kind of gaze, one that makes objects of study crystallize. I will discern how my analytical issues arose in a complex interplay between my concerns as presented here and the making of the Buddhist center a point of strategic intervention. I will show how realms of enquiry arose as I chose to slice<sup>3</sup> into analytical complexities by way of studying among, as well as talking to, people I met on the premises. I will show how I found my informants themselves in the process of opening up realms of enquiry, realities they reported *from* as well as *about*. My point of entry, as presented in this paragraph, constituted an imperative for tracing the life-story as a multidimensional phenomenon, arising from bodies immersed in the world, posing very specific analytical potentials and challenges. I will explore an approach that emphasizes the narrator’s experience of what is central to her process of composing life-stories, as valid knowledge in itself. I will explore an approach that acknowledges the existence of innumerable modes of being present, innumerable modes of using our senses, innumerable modes of perceiving, each constituting a gaze that unfolds reality in its own specific way – researcher and informant alike. I do not claim to make any exhaustive investigations. On the contrary, my very point is this: there will always be more to reality than what we happen to have access to. Rather than pinning any phenomenon to the wall, I will tentatively be teasing out complexities by way of exploring *a phenomenology of narratives*.

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasizing *starting point*, as “immediacy and structure are phenomenological moments to each other” (Csordas 1994:282).

<sup>3</sup> The expression “slicing into” is taken from Csordas (1997:297), as I find the images the expression conjures up very useful, depicting how phenomena can be approached from different angles.



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## 1.2 A quest for transformation

### 1.2.1 An encounter

To get to the Buddhist center I had to travel more than an hour outside the city line. Then I had to walk through a residential area and into the woods. There it was, a little, ordinary house, so ordinary I wondered if I had come to the right place. A sign on the wall told me I had. When I knocked on the door a woman opened. I would have guessed she was in her forties. She turned out to be the same person I had spoken to on the phone. The teachings would be held in an even smaller house across the field, “*the Gumpa*” she said, pointing across a field<sup>4</sup>. But I had come a bit early, so I could sit down and have a cup of tea while waiting, she said. The place looked like a private home, initially I felt like I had intruded on the privacy of strangers. But I had been told to enter, and other people came too. We could have been about five people sitting down in the living room. The furniture looked like it had been bought at a flea-market. Some people engaged in small talk, others did not. I did not listen, as I was preoccupied with my own thoughts. But I did notice that the others were Norwegians. Somehow I had expected at least a couple of Tibetans at a Tibetan Buddhist center<sup>5</sup>. Apart from this observation I did not focus on the others any more than I had to in order to figure out how I was supposed to behave. And when the concern that I might be intruding faded – I soon realized I could just *be* there – this was precisely what I did. Somehow I had been prepared for people asking me who I was and what I was doing there, but to my relief this did not happen. I could just be present, no questions asked.

When the time came, everybody went across the field to an even smaller house, the one that had been referred to as the Gumpa. The first room I entered was so small that only a couple of us could be there at the same time. A lot of shoes were placed here, a fact I would have noticed even if I had been blind; it was a bit smelly. I took off my shoes and went into the main room, understanding that this was the appropriate thing to do. The main room was covered with carpets. Old, large carpets carrying scents of bodies, wear and tear. The whole room was very much characterized by odors, the smell of carpets blending with the aroma of incense. The few that talked were talking with a low voice. I did not listen to the content of what was being said. I had not come there to meet people, meeting people was more like a

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<sup>4</sup> I would later learn that the name “Gumpa”, used to refer to the meditation hut, is slang. The people I met at KTL are well aware that the word actually refers to a monastery.

<sup>5</sup> I would later learn that a Tibetan actually lives at Karma Tashi Ling: Lama Changchub, a Tibetan monk. He has now become a Norwegian citizen.

side effect of my being here. But I did notice that the people present might as well have been a selection of random, fellow students, there was nothing extraordinary or exotic about their appearance. It seemed to me that there were two main age groups present. I would have guessed that most of them were my age (at the time) – in their twenties. And then there were a few that seemed to be in their forties or fifties – the age of my parents (at the time). The colors in the room were reddish and warm, no furniture, but piles of pillows and blankets along the wall. The people who had already arrived had taken a pillow or two, sitting on them cross-legged as well as in other positions. Some were sitting along the wall, leaning against it. To me some seemed to be meditating, as they were assuming what I conceived of as meditational postures: legs across or bent and hands resting on the knees or in the lap. Others seemed like they were just waiting, sitting more casually on the floor. On one of the walls there were shelves, forming some kind of altar painted in red, with numerous beautiful, golden Buddha statues lined up. Scripts, or so I assumed, were neatly wrapped in fabric and put on the shelves besides the statue. The walls were covered with pictures that were also made from a shiny fabric, and they seemed to illustrate different stories. Strange figures, some of them I found quite horrifying: blue faces and terrible grimaces appeared on them in bright colors. Even though people were scattered throughout the room, everybody was sitting more or less facing the same wall. So I did the same. On the wall facing me there was a picture of the young Dalai Lama.

In a little while a man entered the room and sat down in front of us. He was also a Norwegian, but wearing a reddish piece of cloth thrown across his shoulders, a feature that distinguished him from the rest of us. Otherwise he was wearing quite casual clothes. I would have guessed he was in his thirties at the time. He sat down and started talking about life in ways I will assume most people can relate to, but relating familiar events to what he pointed out as central tenets of Buddhism. The philosophy he presented was closely knit to everyday life: its relevance seemed obvious, yet new and radical to me. The teacher would open up for questions and comments. Learning meditational techniques was as important as learning the philosophy behind, we were told. Merely theoretical knowledge without practicing meditation was emphasized as useless. It was compared to knowing all about the medication for your disease, without taking it. We were given explanations and instructions, and we would try practicing the techniques.

The philosophy and bodily practice taught at the Buddhist center were elaborations upon the idea of *change as possible*. What is more, the philosophy as well as the bodily practice

provided *tools intended to bring about such change*. Over time, my personally motivated quest gradually developed into themes I wanted to pursue as an anthropologist as well. In the following paragraphs I will describe how this happened.

### **1.2.2 The teachings**

In this paragraph I will provide an introduction to the theme of transformation, as it was presented in the teachings at the Monday meditations. In the next paragraph I will probe further aspects pertaining to transformation, by presenting the bodily techniques. My aim is *not* to give any introduction to Buddhism as such. Neither will I be able to do justice to the richness of the teachings I encountered at the Monday meditations. What I learnt at the Monday meditations wasn't written down until four years later, when planning the research project that would culminate in this text. The following is merely *an outline of memories that originally formed the basis for my project description*. However, these memories are highly relevant, as they were decisive for my initial choices regarding fieldwork, which in turn set the path for what kind of data-material I could produce. As presented here, my memories, colored by the fact that they weren't written down until much later, constituted the basis upon which I would design my research later on. The references I will be making later on in this text are of a different kind. When knowingly engaging in fieldwork with the aim of producing a thesis, I performed extensive and immediate recordings of what happened and what people said, by writing as well as using a tape recorder when agreed upon. The manner in which I eventually did this, however, was tainted by my initial understandings, as presented here.

At the Monday meditations four central aspects of suffering were presented as the ultimate truths about the nature of suffering. The first truth states that suffering does exist. The second examines the deeper reasons for this suffering, the third truth states that there exists a condition free from suffering, and the fourth is about how to achieve this state. Again and again the teacher pointed out that Buddhism has been quite misunderstood in what was referred to as "*the West*". He explained that translations and interpretations were often misleading, portraying Buddhism as preoccupied with suffering and as representing a very pessimistic outlook on life. When doing fieldwork years later, I was told by several of my informants that Schopenhauer was partly the reason behind this confusion, as his philosophy drew nourishment from Buddhism in many respects, but in many important respects differed. When doing fieldwork years later, all the teachers that I spoke to would repeat what I learnt at the Monday meditations: they emphasized that Buddhism does not claim that everything is

suffering, that the first central truth merely states that *suffering does exist as a phenomenon*. And as what can be understood as a diagnostic process immediately moves on to *the remedy*, this represented a rather *hopeful and optimistic outlook* on life, I was told. A message was conveyed to me as a recurring and central theme: the potential of happiness through *the possibility of radical transformation*.

The teacher would illustrate theoretical points by referring to experience we all were acquainted with. For instance: by pointing out that there are some things we want, and we label them as good and attractive and end up suffering if we don't get them. Other things we do not want, we label them as bad, and suffering is the result if we should get them. This was understood as creating a *pattern of grasping and pushing*: An unenlightened mind is a mind that grasps for phenomena it labels desirable and tries to push away phenomena it labels undesirable. This was explained as a result of the mind engaging in discursive thinking, constantly projecting qualities upon phenomena encountered. Being able *to let go* was emphasized as central to breaking this pattern, to let go one had to put focus on the workings of the mind. The teacher would use the metaphor of an image projector, comparing the images projected on a screen to reality as perceived in an unenlightened state. Examining the images projected would not enhance our understanding much, he said: to understand one has to put focus on the machine making the projections – the mind. We were explained that such a focus is what meditational techniques cultivate.

We would be asked to observe the chatter in our own minds, to notice how our minds nurture thoughts about the past and the future. We were asked to reflect upon how we can make ourselves suffer by thinking about bad events in the past, as well as worrying about the future. Our thoughts were introduced as phenomena that can become chains that tie us to the past and the future, preventing us from relating to the here and now. To me, an image of mind as time-traveling was conjured up: I understood meditation as an instrument for *practicing a return to the here and now*. We were explained that living in the past and the future are ways of relating to phenomena that ultimately do not exist, as the past is no longer there and the future is yet to come. We were explained that by removing ourselves from the present we were creating dream-worlds in which we live, instead of relating to the here and now. We were told that engaging in thoughts about the past and the future will cloud the mind, and make us unable to perceive what is in front of our very noses<sup>6</sup>: If, for instance, you once knew someone

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<sup>6</sup> I once saw a movie where a genius gone mad keeps asking people to hold up four fingers and look at him through the fingers. Then he asks them to tell him how many fingers they see. Everybody answers "four", and he gets angry every single time, calling everybody idiots. When one person takes the time to get to the bottom of this, he discovers, by the help

with dark curly hair that hurt you, you might react emotionally whenever you see someone with dark curly hair. But this is not experiencing the person you see for what s/he is, we were explained that this is just projecting the past into the present, or, more precisely, it is projecting your memories of the past into the present, preventing you from experiencing the freshness of the moment, as dark curls are just – dark curls. Nothing that can hurt you, or ever has.

I understood the message as being that people can be understood as creating their own suffering, and, implicitly, they have the potential of ending the suffering. I understood the message to be that I held a potential of bringing about a change for the better myself. Not by way of revolution, but by way of looking at the world differently. We were explained that in the unenlightened mind enormous discursive elaborations can arise from constant associative processes, and that emotions flow along with the thoughts, as aspects of discursive thinking. What is more, so we were encouraged *to see and experience for ourselves*: Nothing should be accepted as truth just because someone claims it is, not even if this someone were Buddha himself.

Language was explained as central to the clouding of the mind: the mind constructs a dream world by way of the stories it constantly generates, stories about ourselves and the reality we live in, stories that link us to the past and the future. We were told that instead of experiencing phenomena as they are, we end up encountering our *ideas* about them. Living in such a dream-world was explained as something that might be quite pleasurable: we can be thinking about happy moments and looking forward to great events in the future. But even happy dreams were said to generate a potential basis for suffering, creating the foundations of future disappointment if our expectations do not come true. Furthermore, being happy in the dream world was seen as something that can prevent us from consciously addressing the working of the mind, keeping us from discovering what was presented as the true nature of reality, keeping us happily involved with watching the projections, never becoming aware of the projector – our mind. We were told that by never understanding the nature of the reality we are dealing with, we are ultimately kept from achieving enlightenment and true happiness. Vice versa, unhappiness was upheld as a potential blessing in disguise, forcing us to confront reality, thus enabling us to wake up from the dream state, freeing ourselves. I would later

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of the mad genius, that if you hold up four fingers, and look at something through your fingers, you no longer see four fingers. You see eight fingers! (Just try it out.) If you claim that you are seeing four fingers, you are actually telling me that you have not actually *seen*. You are merely telling me about your *preconceptions*, the knowledge you already have of holding up four fingers has gotten in the way of actually observing. You are merely telling me about an idea you have, the idea has gotten in the way of actually seeing, and being able to report what you see.

encounter the metaphor of beautiful flowers thriving on fertile trash and manure: the more manure and trash you struggle with (metaphorically speaking), the better the potential of growing beautiful flowers.

The idea about a separate self was explained as an artifact created by our mind engaging in activities as described above. We were told that the separate self is one of our basic illusions, as separate entities do not exist. Everything was emphasized as interdependent. The following explanation is mine, but it is an attempt at communicating what I understood to be central aspects of the teachings: The text you are holding in your hand right now can appear as a separate, static object. But its true nature (according to this perspective) is better described as a process: the book has been made from wood that has evolved from a tiny seed, feeding on rain, sunlight and dirt. A lot of people have been involved in the transformation from wood to paper. The words written on the paper come from thoughts arisen in the head of another person, and her/his thoughts are the results of dialogues and experiences the writer has had, making the written sentences part of dialogues extending way beyond the pages of the book. The letters have been written on computers designed and made by innumerable other people, who also become part of the creation of the text. What appears to be a separate entity can be understood as a process, interlinking phenomena as ongoing processes in time and space *ad infinitum*, processes you are part of as a reader and holder of the book. I understood the central point to be as follows: The only static thing about the book is *the concept*: a book. The actual phenomenon, what you think of as a book, is already in the process of dissolving, in the process of aging and becoming dust. And so are you. Transformation was upheld as the nature of existence itself, the art of living as one of learning how to go with this eternal flow, not fighting it.

This was a philosophy through which my own experience found resonance. Needles and patches and pills, the experience of no longer knowing my boundaries, what constituted me. The resonance felt like warm golden light falling upon a cold gray landscape. Analytical concepts cannot capture the immediacy of this experience. I am not telling a story about becoming saved or finding any ultimate solution to any problem. My experience and thoughts would change with time, and they keep changing. (And some experiences and thoughts do not change that easily – a phenomenon in itself that I will be returning to). My point in this chapter is merely to present the imperatives that sparked an interest that eventually would culminate in this thesis, as these imperatives appear to me now. These imperatives had everything to do with how later on I decided to focus and proceed when

returning to this environment with the aim of conducting research. Along with my experience of hormones controlling my existence, I was reminded in a real, lived way of how other aspects of being could infuse this chemical-biological existence with – something. I am using the word ‘infuse’ consciously, because I am certainly not talking about an experience of mind over matter. Nothing could remove the experience of biological changes and chemical challenges. For instance, if my blood-pressure fell, the only solution was taking more Cortisone. Merely thinking would not prevent me from losing consciousness. But the challenges acquired the potential of having a different meaning to me.

### **1.2.3 The bodily techniques**

The teachings presented were more than a philosophy. It was interlinked with bodily practice. The first meditational technique I learned consisted of techniques to calm down. I am consciously using the term meditational techniques, not meditation. Meditation was explained as a state one is working towards, through techniques that are often misguidedly referred to as meditation. We were told that sitting in the lotus-position in itself is not meditation, it is *the mode of sitting* that matters. This mode was explained as ultimately independent of techniques. Meditation was explained as a mode of being in the world that over time, by way of practicing the techniques, was intended to infuse every aspect of life. We were told that if what we learnt by practicing meditational techniques was not put to work in our daily lives, it was rather pointless. But we were also told that our unenlightened minds are unruly and untrained. So we were urged to start with easy techniques, for only shorter periods of time to begin with, almost like body building, only that it is not muscle that is being built, but our ability to observe, to be alert, to be present. We were instructed in assuming the correct body position. But we were also told that if for some reason we could not assume this position, we were free to adjust. Harming the body was no good, we were explained. Keeping a straight posture was pointed out as a good thing to do, however, as a straight body creates a straight mind, as it was put on several occasions.

The ideal position was explained as sitting cross legged on a pillow on the floor, with the hands resting lightly on the knees, palms down, or in your lap. I experienced that finding the right point of balance is important. If I did, I did not have to use any force keeping the body up, it would rest in equilibrium. The instructions were as follows: When having assumed the posture, focus can be put on breathing, on the air as it passes the nostrils: cold while coming in, and warm while going out. Or focus can be put on the chest: rising and sinking. Whatever

we chose to focus upon was referred to as our object of meditation. One technique would simply be to count every breath up to ten, and then start from one again. It sounds easy, but doing it demonstrates how difficult it is to keep focused even for the shortest period of time. I experienced how the mind tends to wander off. I could find myself counting “twenty-twelve”. The goal of meditational techniques was explained as not one of becoming free from thoughts: Thinking is simply what the mind does, thoughts radiate from the very existence of a mind. The task of the meditator was explained as rather one of observing and learning about the nature of the mind. Fighting it would merely be continuing the patterns of pushing and grasping, we were told. As opposed to fighting it, we were taught that when you notice that you are thinking, you simply return to whatever you are using as your meditational object, for instance your breath. One of the metaphors given was that we should observe our thoughts as waves on an ocean, watch them arise, and watch them disappear again. We were instructed to just observe, not deny nor fight, just letting go. We were told that the feelings will follow: they will arise and eventually disappear if you don’t pursue them, and just observe what goes on in your mind and body.

Discourse was emphasized as central to all experience of suffering, including so called physical pain. The following example was given: If you feel pain, it is easy to mingle the pain with discursive elaboration – it hurts; what could it be? Could it be something dangerous? If so, we are creating worries that produce more suffering. Or you can be thinking that ‘my pain is the result of Paul pushing me yesterday’ – thus causing anger and more suffering, maybe planning revenge – and so it goes on and on. We were told that instead of getting caught up in such associations, we could choose to merely observe the pain: Not as a good phenomenon, not as a bad phenomenon, just as – a phenomenon. To be observed. One helpful tool we were given was as follows: the moment I realize that I am thinking, I can take a step back from the contents of my thoughts, and label them softly as thinking – in itself an observation. We were told that such labeling could be a temporary tool, helping to create awareness, but simultaneously we were also told that ultimately meditation is about not labeling at all.

Based on the questions asked after the meditational sessions, it seemed like I shared an experience with many of my fellow meditators: the experience of becoming overwhelmed by chaos when first trying meditational techniques. We were explained that the chaos is not a result of practicing meditational techniques: The techniques rather allow us to become aware of chaos that has been there all along. The following metaphor was used: The mind is like a glass of contaminated water, the contamination makes it impossible to see through. But by



sitting down and practicing meditational techniques the contamination is allowed to settle on the bottom, making the water clear and see-through, we were explained. We were told that becoming aware of a phenomenon is a prerequisite for gaining insight into its nature, and being able to deal with it. The goal of meditational techniques was emphasized as not the calming down in itself, even though that can be nice. A distinction was made between calming-down-meditation and insight-meditation. However, these were pointed out as interlinked, the calmness was explained as a prerequisite for the gaining of insight. The water must be clear in order to let us see, we were told. The meditator was explained as someone who tries to watch and gain insight into the workings of her mind, revealing reality as ultimately mind. This is how I remember what we were told.

Thoughts and feelings were explained as social constructions and conditioned patterns of actions-reactions. By realizing their nature through dedicated practice one has a chance of freeing oneself from these patterns, we were told. Our ultimate nature was explained as something beyond discursive reality. This ultimate nature was referred to as the Buddha-nature. The challenge was presented as realizing our true nature, which was explained as seeing that we are already Buddhas. Such insight, or enlightenment, can happen in a second, or it can take life-times, we were explained. We learnt that one could also experience glimpses of such enlightenment in an otherwise unenlightened state. However, emphasis would always be put on the here and now, life as it is, not on anything we expect to happen in the future. We were told that focusing on enlightenment would be grasping for enlightenment, merely continuing the pushing-grasping pattern, the very pattern we were trying to break by way of meditation. Such speculations, as well as speculations about past lives were never encouraged at these gatherings. On the contrary, questions regarding such issues would normally be dismissed ever so subtly by the teacher saying that “*we do not focus on that*” or “*that is not important*” and directing attention towards other issues, by different varieties of “*what does matter is [ ]*”. What I found to be a down-to-earth, pragmatic attitude characterized the teachings.

## 1.3 Transformation revisited

### 1.3.1 Conceiving a project

I moved from Oslo. I no longer had the opportunity to visit the Buddhist center. However, my encounter with the Buddhist center stayed with me as memories, constantly nudging me.

Four years later I decided to do something about it. I designed a research project. As pointed out in the former paragraphs, transformation was a central theme at the Monday meditations. From personal concerns I had developed an interest in the phenomenon of transformation at a more general level, which constituted my point of departure when applying for funding. My interest had grown into curiosity about my fellow meditators as well. What were their reasons for finding the philosophy and practices relevant? I had noticed that there were mainly Norwegians, not Tibetans at the Tibetan Buddhist Center. It added fuel to my curiosity: Why did Norwegians, born and raised in a Christian society, come to a Tibetan Buddhist center? Personally I had gone through quite unusual events to end up there. This told me nothing about the motives of my fellow meditators. But it formed a point of departure when formulating a preliminary hypothesis preparing for fieldwork:

Could something have happened in their lives, something that could be understood as a turning point of some kind? Some literature I found seemed to support this hypothesis. For instance, Ahlberg (1980) writes about what she refers to as counter culture in Norway. She points out that people might experience situations that motivate a search for new frames of interpretation. Her model of explanation could embrace my own reasons for coming to the Buddhist center. What is more, it allowed me to move tentatively from my own experience to the phenomenon of Monday meditations in general. I chose a preliminary hypothesis: that people coming to the Buddhist center might be trying to bring about some kind of change in their lives or their experience of life. I had reasons to assume that my fellow meditators had some kind of interest in transformation, but I had no way of knowing it for certain. And if they did, I had no way of knowing what constituted their imperatives for seeking transformation, what they were attempting to change, why, by what means, or if they were able to achieve whatever it was they sought. In short: I wanted to learn more about the agendas of my fellow meditators. My interest in transformation as a phenomenon formed a tentative starting point when I planned my project, but I wanted to use an approach that allowed me to follow up whatever issues my fellow meditators reported as important. It was their concerns that constituted my focus.

### **1.3.2 The aspect of redescription**

In preparation for fieldwork, I contemplated different aspects of transformation. In general, acquiring new theoretical frameworks provides an opportunity to revise your understandings of who you are, and of what kind of reality you are dealing with. The way such

understandings are interlinked with experience of life, and the potential of transformation herein, is what the thesis of redescription relies on. Redescription is a central element in traditional psychoanalysis. Schäfer (1992), among countless others, explores psychoanalytic therapy as a means of changing ones stories about oneself, claiming that this transforms people's experience of life. Buddhism seemed to hold a propensity for doing just that. Bishop writes that "both depth psychology and Tibetan Buddhism address ultimate questions: what is the basic stuff of existence, what is consciousness, what is meaning, how can we search for truth, how can we live it? Both address the problem of excessive conceptuality and literalism. Both point to the necessity of a new language in order to deepen insight" (1993:134). A lot of literature that I found turned out to approach Buddhism as therapy. This focus can be exemplified by Brazier: "Therapists and spiritual practitioners are all concerned with the human spirit, its disease and its liberation", and: "when the Buddha himself was asked what his teaching was, he said it was whatever leads to the true cessation of suffering. Buddhism, therefore, is also, and perhaps we may say primarily, a therapy" (1995:18-20).

I am not making any claims regarding what Buddhism is or is not. My point is that the therapeutic aspect was frequently addressed in much literature I found on the subject, an aspect that found resonance in my own experience at the Buddhist center. The literature lent support to my idea of transformation as somehow important to pursue. What is more, this literature provided me with some ideas of what kind of data-material I needed. If the teachings at the Buddhist center provided people with means of changing their stories about the world, it would be relevant to listen to their stories to trace potential elements of change.

### **1.3.3 The aspect of bodily techniques**

However, one doesn't have to engage in Buddhist practice to see that meditational techniques do indeed differ from any approach working solely with the change of narratives. Silence, breathing and body postures are equally important. So I was told, and so I would experience for myself. The same themes were addressed in academic literature I found. For instance, Jackson claims that "altered patterns of body use may induce new experiences and provoke new ideas, as when a regulation and steadying of the breath induces tranquility of mind, or a balanced pose bodies forth a sense of equanimity. Likewise, emotional and mental turmoil may induce corresponding changes in bodily attitude, as when depression registers in a slumped posture of grief is manifest in an absolute loss of muscle tonus" (1983:334). Jackson

compares techniques of the body with musical techniques “since both transport us from the quotidian world of verbal distinctions and categorical separations into a world where boundaries are blurred and experience transformed”<sup>7</sup> (1983:338). He argues that patterns of body use engender mental images and instill moral qualities: “We are all familiar with the way decontraction of muscular “sets” and the freeing of energies bound up in habitual deformations of posture or movement produce an altered sense of self, in particular a dissolution of those conceptual “sets” such as role, gender and status which customarily define our social identity” (1983:338).

Keys to understanding aspects of transformation in Buddhist practice are to be found here: in the manipulation of the body, postures and breathing. The bodily techniques engaged in, as well as the philosophical systems studied, can be understood as what Jackson calls means of intervening the unitary field of body-mind-habitus (1983). Or using the terms of Csordas, engaging in meditational practice can be understood as “both guided by the habitus, as well as a means of generating and embodying the habitus embedded in the practices performed into the bodies of the attendants” (Csordas 1997:297). Csordas is not introducing the pre-objective as pre-cultural, but explains by drawing upon Bourdieu, how the pre-objective is structured according to the logic of a particular cultural field.

An emphasis of the non lingual aspects of being is very much in accordance with Buddhist understandings, as they were introduced to me at the Buddhist center. Scheper-Hughes and Lock write regarding what they refer to as Buddhist traditions, that “understanding is not reached through analytic methods, but rather through an intuitive synthesis, achieved in moments of transcendence that are beyond speech, language, and the written word (1987:12-13). Understanding bodily techniques as an aspect of transformation provided further clues regarding how I should go about producing my data-material. In addition to listening to people’s stories, I had to generate knowledge by probing into the aspect of bodily techniques.

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<sup>7</sup> He emphasizes that “this is not a way of saying that music and bodily practices never are means of making social distinctions, but that music and movement often take the form of oppositional practices which eclipse speech and nullify the divisions which dominate everyday life”(Jackson 1983:338).

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## 1.4 The Gaze

### 1.4.1 Different kinds of knowledge

The emphasis of the Buddhist teachings on moving beyond language, even the very claim that doing so was possible, posed particular challenges I had to grapple with when revisiting with the aim of doing research. One of my informants put it this way:

*“Buddhism is radical lingual critique. Accessing reality and truth can only be done through absolute silence, losing language totally, abandoning all concepts, all conceptions, all expectations. Only if you stand totally naked without anything to cling to reality may open up”.*

Generating knowledge by way of abandoning concepts is very contrary to the project of generating knowledge by way of performing a social scientific study. Social science relies on language and concepts. This meant, that revisiting the Buddhist center with the aim of doing research would not merely imply being more attentive or thorough when observing. Observing is not just about being where something happens or being as attentive as possible. The question is, attentive towards what? There are several modes of being present, several modes of using our senses, several modes of perceiving – and theoretically they can all be accompanied by the exactly same physical positioning in the exactly same spot. But with one radical difference: they are modes of being present that generate different kinds of knowledge. I realized that conducting research would constitute an act of transformation in itself, in the sense that when revisiting I would open up a different realm of enquiry, compared to my first encounter.

Indeed, fieldwork has been described as a project valorizing certain kinds of knowledge to the exclusion of other kinds (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). My first encounter with the Buddhist center was colored by my focus on the aspects of the philosophy and meditation I found useful for myself. I came for personal reasons. I was not planning research. I wasn't focusing on the social environment, in terms of what fieldwork in general is assumed to imply. My impression of the first encounter was rather one of different colors, smells and sounds, dwelling within these intensities. More accountable facts like the number of people present, their gender and age were of no relevance to me, and passed more or less unnoticed. Realizing that I could get away with not talking or relating to the others, I chose not to, with a great sense of relief. To generate data-material for research I had to go about in a different manner. I could not conduct fieldwork by merely sitting down with my eyes half closed,

watching my thoughts and feelings come and go like waves on the ocean. Conducting fieldwork implies a drive towards something else: the whole purpose is to get somewhere, to produce something that has to satisfy certain academic criteria. Not only does academic knowledge rely on the cultivation of language, but this kind of cultivation makes the present into a means of getting somewhere else, an instrument for realizing the future, as Øian puts it (1998:10-11, 361). This is the very opposite of dwelling and letting go, so central to meditational practice.

I was on a personal quest for transformation when I first encountered the Buddhist center. My situation at the time colored what aspects of the teachings I could recall when preparing my research project. I extracted as well as annotated when listening: picking up parts and pieces that I would contemplate. Years later when planning fieldwork, using the Buddhist center as point of departure, I felt a bit irritated because I had been so inattentive at the time. And yes, I had missed out on a lot. But further thought made me also see that I hadn't been inattentive, I had in fact been intensely focused and attentive. But: any focus implies the creation of a periphery and the turning of ones back to something else. What I had thought of as inattentiveness at first had actually enabled me to gain a great deal of information, only of a different kind than the information I would have acquired if I had been thinking about myself as doing fieldwork.

If, when coming to the Buddhist center the first time, my aim had been making research, I would have been present in a different way. And my attention may not have been drawn towards how much that might be at stake for people coming here. I would not have experienced the seamless continuum between my personal quest for transformation and the way I related to the teachings, thus I may have overlooked the importance and implications of these aspects when trying to understand what my fellow meditators were up to. I would have been very aware of my ultimate aim as one of writing, producing words and sentences. But in a constant attempt at putting words on my experience, I would actually change what I was able to experience. How much so, and the radical implications this change would have, could be brought to my attention, because when I first came to the Buddhist center I had no intentions of conducting research. My first encounter with the Buddhist center provided experience with "participation as an end in itself, rather than as a means of collecting closely observed data which will be subject to interpretation elsewhere after the event" (Jackson 1998:340). My experience with participation as an end in itself, allowed me to see how this kind of participation cultivates a different kind of knowledge. My pre-fieldwork time gave

me information of a kind I would never get during the time that was economically funded and officially defined as fieldwork. The pre-fieldwork-time had implications for what I deemed relevant to pursue by way of research. With a different point of departure, I would have produced a different set of data-material. Neither better nor worse than the data-material I ended up producing – just different. I realized that whatever focus I had, I would bring out certain aspects of the social gathering, while I would miss out on others.

My pre-fieldwork experience had sensitized me towards the importance of the *non-observable aspects* of the meditational gathering. I knew that this was a social event that differed very much from a club-meeting, where people's main goal is to meet and relate to others. I knew that people did not necessarily come to the Buddhist center to meet others. To get at whatever was at stake for my fellow meditators, I knew that participant observation would not do. Not just because observing people sitting silently with their eyes half closed for hours on end does not provide much social interaction to analyze. But because I knew that focusing on social interaction would not produce *the kind* of data-material I needed. What went on at the Monday meditations appeared to me as merely tip of the iceberg, and my interest was directed to below the surface.

#### **1.4.2 Opening realms of enquiry**

I had seen how my focus when I first came to the Buddhist center had been basically upon myself: it was *my* personal concerns that made me come, it was *my* interest in the philosophy that made me come, it was what *I* could get from the teachings that mattered. Meeting other people was simply a side effect of listening to the teachings. As such I was self-centered. Not in any normative meaning of the word, but as descriptive of my agenda. The philosophy presented provided a continuation of my inward focus. I even learnt that the Tibetan word for Buddhist is nang pa, supposedly meaning s/he who looks inwards, in the sense of working with one's inside, one's mind. However, I had also learnt that it does not stop with self-perception. On the contrary, looking inwards was presented as a basic tool for *seeing the world*, in fact, *the* basic tool. Looking inwards is actually presented as *the only way* of achieving true knowledge about the world, for grasping the *interconnectedness* that Buddhism emphasizes.

I was told that focusing upon breath forces you into a twilight zone, where outside becomes inside: air goes in and air goes out. The intention was explained as one of confronting you

with the question: What then, becomes of the distinction between inside and outside? Not by way of intellectual pondering, but by way of making the questions arise through bodily experience. Indeed, I had experienced that focusing upon bodily parts, like sensing the floor against my bottom, furthermore stimulates the question, is it me I am sensing, or is it the floor? Through engaging in meditational techniques my attention was drawn to how my thoughts are provoked by stimuli: if I heard a bird chirp when I was meditating, it could trigger innumerable feelings and thoughts, by way of the associative processes my mind engaged in. Again, I was confronted with how my thoughts and feelings, what I tend to think about as my 'inside', was connected to phenomena in the 'outside' world. I experienced how techniques of visualization work in a similar manner. For instance, doing so-called *Tonglen*:

Tonglen is a practice where you can visualize your breathing in the pain of other people as dark smoke, you visualize how the smoke hits a core inside yourself (your ego), you visualize how it causes the hard crust on the surface to dissolve (the ego dissolving), and how it slowly reveals a glowing source of light, as you breathe out and send happiness, joy, or whatever might bring the sufferer relief. I realized that engaging in this kind of meditation can be seen as a process where boundaries are symbolically dissolved: the pain of others is visualized as becoming your own. The practice of Tonglen was explained as a process contributing to the dissolution of your ego: Opening up for pain, through breathing it in as smoke, was explained as challenging, and ultimately reversing, the habitual patterns of pushing and grasping. By repeating such visualizations, you are supposed to slowly change who you are, through reworking your habits. The meditator engaging in this kind of meditation quite literally visualizes boundaries as melting. Along with this melting, I experienced that distinctions like me-others, outside-inside, become radically challenged. In fact, I found that by way of meditational practice, reality is re-introduced with an unsettling indeterminacy that somehow I have to relate to, as meditational practice forces me to dwell in this indeterminacy, sensing it through my very body.

At the teachings I learnt that through meditational practice, emotions are supposed to be discovered as floating continuations of each other, of thoughts and events, revealing the individual as an illusion. I learnt that the meditator is supposed to discover her/himself as constituted by everything that happens and has ever happened. I was told that this kind of self-centeredness goes beyond looking at one's own bellybutton. By practicing meditation as well as listening to the teacher, I learnt that this kind of self-observation is about experiencing me-as-inseparable-from-the-world. I experienced the teachings and practice as nurturing a



sensation of *the porous, transparent me*, and that by doing so, reality was opened up as a new realm of enquiry. I see this as an in itself constituting transformation, a transformation holding the promise of bringing about even more change: if new realms are opened up, they may be further probed.

In general, experience arises *as a result of* holding certain world-views, experience arises *as a result of* engaging in certain bodily practice – *ad infinitum*. Meditational practice assumes certain understandings of what constitutes reality, understandings that are further cultivated through meditation. Epistemology and ontology are inseparable. Holding a certain set of beliefs may totally alter the way one experiences things, at the same time as holding a certain set of beliefs alters the range of things one is capable of learning from one's experience: "the patterns, connections, discriminations which are made possible by having in mind a comprehensive interpreting scheme greatly increase the number of meanings that can be found in things, and, therefore, the amount of possible information that can be acquired. The radio-listener for example, who hears crackles on his transistor might take it to be atmospheric static, may well be perceiving the same sounds as the coast-guard who is listening for signs from a missing yacht" (Donovan 1979:81). Our theories influence what can be perceived, and vice versa. Knowledge is produced, accumulated and developed in constantly ongoing processes, and our experience of reality along with it. New theories can enable us to perceive new aspects of the reality in which we exist.

Popper claims that new theories can function as new, powerful sense-organs (Popper 1963 in Karlsen 1997). I find the associations created by the concept of sense-organ important, underlining how radical the claim actually is. If you had never smelled anything before in your life, and were suddenly endowed with olfactory nerves, a whole new dimension would be added to your being. Theories are not just about organizing or reorganizing the experience you already have, they are part of what you can experience in the first place. A new theory can add new dimensions to your being as much as if had you been endowed with a new sense organ. What is more, I find that the metaphor of the sense organ underlines that reality is not limited to what we happen to have access to. It is a metaphor pointing to the limits of methods and methodology. Fieldworking does not add knowledge to the knowledge I would have had if not engaging in fieldwork. It is the cultivation of certain kinds of knowledge, to the exclusion of other kinds of knowledge.

The anthropological tradition of fieldwork has always appealed to me because of its propensity for capturing multifaceted aspects of being. Anthropological fieldwork implies the use of the whole body, using theoretical tools and methods emphasizing context. And yet, when planning this research project, my experience at the Buddhist center forced me to contemplate how data-production never the less implies transformation and reduction of the reality we are trying to understand. I realized that when doing research, I would have to go about it in ways that were not compatible with relating to reality the way I had during my first encounter. I was forced to contemplate how choices that enable observation are made down to the very basic issues of which senses are to be used, and the ways these senses are to be used. I became acutely aware of how lines of demarcation can be seen as introduced into experience – what kind of experience that counts when it comes to the production of scientific data is as important as how experience is transformed when presented in scientific texts. Such choices form the gaze that in turn creates the reality we relate to as researchers: they make our objects of study crystallize. This theme was not new to me, but in this context it took on appearance of something of vital importance, a phenomenon that needed to be probed into as such: Fieldworking represents a certain kind of gaze that opens up reality as a specific realm of enquiry.

## 2. Points of entry

From the observations I made in chapter one, I concluded that to produce relevant data-material for my purposes, I needed to talk to my fellow meditators as well as participate at meditational gatherings. However, more detailed plans had to be made. To choose the best points of entry, I had to contemplate pragmatic, theoretical and ethical issues, in relation to what I already knew about the Monday meditations.

### 2.1 *The quest of seeking*

#### 2.1.1 Some observations

The Buddhist center did not represent a place of conversion as I had earlier experienced in certain Christian contexts<sup>8</sup>, where a person is understood as either saved or not, and the task of the Christian is understood as that of converting those who are not saved. On the contrary, shades of gray seemed to be the prominent feature: I had even met people involved in meditational activities at Karma Tashi Ling who defined themselves as Christians, and a man in his twenties defined himself as a Muslim. Nobody seemed to conceive of this as a problem, nor as constituting a challenge for conversion. To me, the apparent lack of clear borderlines and distinctions was one of the most striking characteristics of the Monday meditations.

What is more: when I first came to the Buddhist center, I had observed that I was not visiting closed society. People came here much the same way as people go to church. They lived elsewhere, just like me. The others seemed to come and leave, just like I did. Some would come on a regular basis, whereas some would visit once or twice, only never to be seen again. At the gatherings some would be talking and relating to each other in ways indicating that they came there on a regular basis, and/or knew each other from other contexts as well. Most of them, however, did not seem to know the others. The group seemed to be characterized by loose boundaries, it was porous in a way that made it difficult to delimit, or talk about any group in the singular. Even though the number of people present was fairly stable, many of the faces present would change. People were, metaphorically speaking, like particles flowing

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<sup>8</sup> The author went to a national Christian boarding-school when attending senior high school.

through a specific place in space and time, only to part moments later. The lack of any clear group boundaries seemed to be a central feature, fluctuation and change seemed predominant.

As time passed, I had started to recognize the ones who came there on a fairly regular basis. Even though I never engaged in any heavy socializing, sometimes we did engage in small talk if we met on the bus on our way to the center. At other times I would come and leave in silence, alone, just like the others. The conversations that occurred, however, had provided me with clues I could make use of when planning research. For instance, the people I talked to seemed to have engaged in a lot of activities that were alien to me. In addition to having had experience with meditation from other, non-Buddhist contexts, many had tried out activities like Tai Chi or different kinds of martial arts, different kinds of yoga, and some had a specific interest in mystic traditions of Islam (like Sufism) and Judaism (like Cabbala) – though an interest in Hinduism seemed more predominant. A lot of them had attended courses in spiritual development, read books found in what is often labeled as the New Age section of book stores, like astrology, alternative medicine and healing, and traveled to places conceived of as spiritual centers, explained as important to their personal development. It appeared to me as if to several of the attendants, the Buddhist center was only one of several stations along a much longer path, in something that appeared to be a larger quest. This quest was referred to as *seeking*.

I learnt that seeking manifested itself in a multitude of activities. I also learnt that seeking went beyond such observable activities. It seemed to refer to an attitude, some kind of basic orientation or outlook on life in general that was emphasized as being of vital importance. Seeking could, and often did, seem to manifest in observable activity - as coming to a meditational gathering. But not necessarily. And certainly not all the time. Seeking seemed to embrace certain modes of reflecting on the self and the world as well as modes of enacting these reflections<sup>9</sup>. Seeking was explained as the core of the individual life project: finding your own truths, constructing your own personal beliefs. Seeking seemed to be life made into an ongoing project of self-development. It reflected what Vandeskog analyzes as the perception of a moral responsibility of reflecting and choosing, the conspicuous combination of being free to choose, as well as being forced to do so, a paradox he points out as characteristic of late modernity (ibid 2001). Not only were the Monday meditations impossible to delimit and talk about in terms of a specific group because of its porous

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<sup>9</sup> This observation was done long before I had ever read Rose (1999), but its significance did not occur to me until years later. The way I am putting it here, relies heavily on Rose's choice of words.

boundaries. But what took place at the Monday meditations was also difficult to delimit, in the sense that it could be understood as manifesting general concerns of a specific time in history.

The preliminary conversations about seeking had certain characteristics. Without sharing any specifics regarding our lives, the people I met at the Buddhist center and I could engage in conversation about seeking in general. At one level our conversation could be regarded as impersonal: we would leave each other without having gained any knowledge of the other person's family-life, education or age. At another level I found our conversation very much personal, in the sense of being about what mattered to me, i.e. existential questions. Not talking about one's career, social background, age, education, not making the issue of marriage, kids, houses and cars the main topic, created a sense of freedom for me. I did not have to let practical aspects of my life be put under the scrutiny of a stranger. The moment you tell someone something about your life, you get a response from the other. Even a non-response is a response. In itself the response may not amount to much. But the accumulation of certain responses (accumulation is unavoidable as many different people keep probing into the same issues) may amount to a lot. The responses are constant reminders of who I am (in the eyes of the questioner), of what I should have been (in the eyes of the questioner), what is considered normal and what is not (in the eyes of the questioner). The fact that certain questions tend to be repeated by many different people, certain themes probed into with much greater frequency and force than others, tells a story in itself about the significance certain issues are infused with.

In my experience, being asked questions about my life can put me in a situation where I must explain, and sometimes even defend, my choices in life. This experience has led me to believe that the questions asked through small-talk can represent forces strongly felt if you don't comply to general norms and expectations in general. You may have the freedom to answer however you like, you may even refuse to answer. Nevertheless you are confronted with, and forced to relate to certain issues, regardless of whether you find them relevant or interesting. I believe that such reminders *do* something to the person being reminded. *What* it does and *how* it is experienced is a different matter. Personally I find inquisitive conversation tedious and stagnant, so I find it delightful to be able to leave such issues behind. The preliminary conversations I had with people attending the meditations moved at a level beyond what I considered trivia of life. Instead of thematizing potential differences pertaining to education, gender, ethnicity and social status, we could connect: a realm of philosophical

elaboration was opened up into which we could venture together. This kind of joint venture was what I wanted to pursue when doing research.

### **2.1.2 Some practical implications**

From the observations pointed out in the last paragraph I drew a few conclusions. I could not delimit my fieldwork to the Buddhist center. The Buddhist center is merely one of many places visited by people engaging in seeking. Most of the time seeking takes place elsewhere. The Buddhist center is not a monastery or society inhabited on a permanent basis. Most of the time it is empty, much like a church building. There are, of course, people responsible for the existence of the Buddhist center as an organization. But neither these people nor the people I had met at the Monday meditations lived on the premises. The people coming to the Monday meditations came mainly on an individual basis, and they did not form any group beyond a couple of hours spent at the meditations. Then they would part, and go back to their own homes and lives. True, I would learn that a Tibetan monk lives in the Gumpa, and that a woman lives in the house. And from time to time one or two other people can be staying at Karma Tashi Ling for a short period of time. But this does not change the fact that there were simply not enough people at the Buddhist center to ensure the production of sufficient data-material. And as formerly pointed out, the meditational gatherings did not provide much social interaction to analyze. Neither would such analysis be the most relevant approach to get at what was at stake in people's quests of seeking.

To get at the concerns of my fellow meditators, I found it useful to conduct narrative analysis. It would be useful to produce data-material by pursuing the same kind of conversations that I had already engaged in at the Buddhist center, letting people tell me more about their respective projects of seeking. By probing into the stories produced by such conversations, I could follow up whatever issues that my fellow meditators pointed out as important, and I could trace potential aspects of transformation, to whatever extent this turned out to be relevant. In the spirit of the conversations that I had during my pre-fieldwork time, I decided not to introduce issues pertaining to age, education, social status and the like. The Monday meditations had constituted a free-zone to me, and it might be experienced as such by fellow meditators as well. If so, I wanted to respect that. The fact that none of the people I had talked to had touched upon such issues during my pre-fieldwork time provided a clue in itself in this regard. To the extent my informants elaborated on these variables I would follow it up, but I did not want to force any issue. I would merely ask why they had come to the Buddhist

center, where they came from and where they saw themselves heading, and then it could be up to my informants to decide what they wanted to tell me.

As the meditations themselves did not provide opportunities for narrative interviewing, I had to have these conversations outside of the Buddhist center. I needed to find people who agreed to talk with me while I was using recording equipment, so I could transcribe their stories for further analysis. It is not very wise to run down a total stranger and ask him/her to tell you about their life. I needed to position myself in such a way that I could get to know people a little before asking them to become my informants. I needed to give them an opportunity to get a sense of who I was, acquire a basis from which they could choose whether they wanted to talk to me or not. I needed to participate at meditational gatherings. Doing so would also provide the opportunity to learn more about the bodily practice and teachings.

The considerations I have pointed out in these paragraphs, made it clear that my fieldwork would not constitute “the detailed study of a limited area” (Gupta 1997:39). But I would have to position my body somewhere to find informants, and I would have to make delimitation, the geographical aspect being one of many. To this end the Buddhist center was useful. It could function as what Gupta refers to as “a strategic point of intervention”. Using the Buddhist center as a point of departure was a good idea for using what is often referred to as the snowball approach. Getting some basic knowledge would give indications regarding how to proceed: point in the directions I would have to move – geographically as well as theoretically. From the information gained initially, I would get to know about other people and places relevant to visit, as well as generating new questions that might be relevant to ask. This way of proceeding emphasizes the well known fact that the field is construed by the anthropological enquiry itself. Not in the sense of claiming the field as mere fiction, but in the sense of putting questions of location, intervention and the situated-ness of knowledge into focus, as Gupta and Ferguson puts it (1997) and as addressed by Vered Amit (2000).

### **2.1.3 Some ethical aspects**

Every choice made when doing research is steeped in ethical issues, from the planning of fieldwork to the writing of the final monograph. Ethical considerations had to be my number one priority when operationalizing, as well as throughout the whole process of research, including the writing of this text. I have already pointed out that basing my research upon

analyzing social interaction would be difficult, considering the characteristics of the meditational gatherings. And I have pointed out that such analysis would not be the best way to proceed to generate relevant data-material for my purposes. But just as importantly, ethical considerations underlined my choice of *not* making the Buddhist center or the meditational gatherings objects of study:

Meditational gatherings are occasions where people can be assumed to come to find peace and quiet, to retreat. It does not seem right to study and write about people engaging in such personal activities, people who withdraw should not be involuntarily put in the spotlight. At the time when I first encountered the Buddhist center, I would have left the premises rather quickly if I had met anybody there with the aim of doing research. There was also the problem of anonymity. To commit to detailed writing about meditational gatherings (a prerequisite for exploring social processes at work), would have made the people involved identifiable. The meditational gatherings that I wanted to attend, meditation for beginners, were not characterized by rituals that could be described without implicitly identifying people. True, there was sitting meditation, but there are limits to how much can be said about people sitting still in the same position. Apart from sitting, the meditations were about the teacher teaching, and people asking questions, questions that could be personal in the sense that quoting them might identify the questioner. Whatever debates arose would be equally tricky to analyze without making the people involved recognizable. Certain patterns could be observed and described at an impersonal level, which I have already demonstrated, and which I will be doing again. But as more detailed writing seemed impossible, such generalizations would not be sufficient as data-material in general, and certainly not sufficient considering the issues I wanted to pursue.

Furthermore, in general I feel uneasy about positioning myself in situations where I study others. I assume that being objectified in this manner is uncomfortable to most people. Even if I had been able to make all my data anonymous, being present with the agenda of studying social aspects of the gatherings could make people feel very uncomfortable. In fact, so much so that some might have chosen not to come to the gatherings at all. Theoretically I could have solved this problem by doing hidden fieldwork. But this poses obvious ethical dilemmas. Personally I have yet to work with phenomena that could justify such an approach. I am not saying such occasions do not exist. But in general, if I cannot be comfortably open about my agenda, I tend to conceive of this as an imperative for changing the agenda, not one of hiding it. In this specific case the cat would be out of the sack pretty soon anyway: I would



be looking for people I could ask to become my informants. To do so, I would have to present myself.

My challenge was to design a project that the people coming to the Buddhist center as well as I could be comfortable with. I was genuinely interested in the practice and philosophy of Buddhism, and genuinely interested in the stories of seeking that people could tell me. As far as I could see, these interests of mine should not be offensive to anybody. From what I had experienced before, the people I had met at the Buddhist center were much into reflection and analysis themselves. Listening to, and participating in this kind of dialogue would be key activity in my fieldwork, not observation in the sense of mapping people's activities at meditational gatherings. I wanted to participate at meditational gatherings. But when doing so I would make participation an end in itself. I decided that the time spent at the Buddhist center should constitute occasions for creating what I chose to term background information. Certainly, when coming home I would write down reflections in a fieldwork-diary. These reflections, however, would be based upon experience generated by studying *among* others, not from studying others. This is not just a play with words. I am not talking about hiding the fact that I was writing. The way I chose to be present in the first place would have implications for the kind of knowledge I could produce. What I could write down after participating would be the kind of observations that can arise by studying *among* others, as opposed to the kind of observations that arise by making others into objects of study.

Another concern was this: I would be talking with people about existential questions and events in their lives, maybe even unpleasant ones. In general, asking questions and giving feedback always carries a potential of doing harm. Feedback is unavoidable, verbally as well as non-verbally, as the neutral listener does not exist. No response is also a response, and can be a devastating one. The wrong kind of feedback may be harmful. Before starting out my interviews I did not know how the conversations would develop. Even if I had known, there would be no certain way of telling whether certain subjects were touchy or not. I had designed a project based upon the assumption that the conceptualizations people have are of importance for their experience of life, their happiness. This carries responsibility when having conversation with people, as conversation is a way of negotiating what kind of reality we are dealing with. Overestimating my role or potential for influencing people's wellbeing would be presumptuous. Yet, I had an obligation to be prepared in advance, as well as to continually assess situations. Better safe than sorry. As a researcher I would take the lead in the sense of asking questions, but whereto the conversations were heading had to be a joint

venture. I had to be observant and flexible, so that I did not pursue matters that my informants showed reluctance to be talking about.

How to take care of people who believe in an analytical text is not a new challenge. Alver says that in her work she has found no other solution than to be careful with analytical concepts and categories. Language and genre are never neutral: “if a person sees her reality reflected in a text that interprets the reality not as just belief, but as something that is not true, it can be a serious assault and violation of trust, the very trust forming the basis for stories being told in the first place” (Alver 1996:14-15, my translation). What Alver points out here I find very important. However, I want to make an addition. Not violating trust is not just a question of being careful with analytical concepts and categories; it is *also*, and maybe *primarily*, a question of *basic attitude*. We are dealing with a challenge that goes far beyond choice of language and genre. We need to examine the very basis from which these choices are made. What are our ideas of the analytical enterprise to begin with? What ontological and epistemological premises are we building upon ourselves, as researchers? Robbins has noted how academics with an interest in New Religious Movements tend to exclude certain versions of the phenomena in question by refusing to accord them legitimacy. He draws attention to what he calls epistemological exclusionary rules that become decisive for research results, and says that certain respondents are *a priori* seen as incapable of valid insight, mentioning committed converts of recriminating apostates as a case example (Robbins 2001). I would like to add: proceeding in a seemingly ‘neutral’ way, in the sense of making the issue of validity irrelevant, may also be a way of presenting our informants as incapable of valid insight:

There seems to be a common denominator within the social sciences: the agnostic approach, in the sense that the task of the researcher is not to judge what is told on any scale of truthfulness as such. I am a proponent of this kind of agnosticism myself in this text. However, if the agnostic approach becomes synonymous with approaching the understandings of our informants as irrelevant as truth claims, violation is inevitable for anybody who deciphers whatever words we wrap our message in. *This is a challenge that cannot be reduced to an issue of taking care of people*. I am not claiming that taking care of people is not important, it certainly is. But ‘taking care of’ becomes yet another violation if our attitude is the patronizing one of posing an ‘us’ as having access to a more real truth than ‘them’, and see our task as one of ‘protecting them’ from being hurt by this (most doubtful) ‘fact’.

### 2.1.4 Some theoretical implications

Approaching what our informants say as relevant truth claims is *not* the same as saying that there is no reality apart from our constructions. On the contrary, I believe there is. In this respect I subscribe to *Critical Realism*, which is built upon the fact that *we can be wrong*. I can bump my foot into a stone, because I did not know the stone was there. Someone can get mad at me, because I offended her/him inadvertently, not knowing that I was stepping on a sore toe. In other words, reality is more than just what one happens to think about it (Sayer 2000). This encounter with being wrong through bumping into the unexpected *does* something to what we can believe in as reality, it *does* something to what stories we can tell ourselves about reality, and it *does* something to our understanding of what kind of phenomena these stories constitute. *What* exactly it does is another matter. *How* bumping one's foot is being experienced, interpreted and integrated in ones ongoing stories about life is not a given. But it does mean that I operate with some kind of *restraint* when trying to understand the reality that I am relating to: my assumptions are being tested through my experience in everyday life. Indeed, when exploring a phenomenology of narratives, I will argue that the perspective that Critical Realism provides is invaluable:

A basic tenet in Critical Realism is *the independence* of the world in relation to our thoughts about it. A distinction is made between the *intransitive* and *transitive* dimensions of knowledge (Bhaskar 1975). The theories of science are part of the transitive dimension: "Rival theories and sciences have different transitive objects (theories about the world) but the world they are about – the intransitive dimension – is the same; otherwise they would not be rivals" (Collier 1994:51). Sayer points out that when theories change (the transitive dimension) it does not mean that what they are about (the intransitive dimension) necessarily changes too: "there is no reason to believe that the shift from a flat earth theory to a round earth theory was accompanied by a change in the shape of the earth itself. [ ] When researchers change their minds, it is unlikely to produce a significant change in the phenomena studied. For the most part, social scientists are cast in the modest role of *construing the world*, rather than *constructing* it (Sayer 2006:10-11, my emphasis). A colleague of mine says that Critical Realism is valuable, because instead of making futile attempts at building "solid roads through the oceans", it rather constitutes "a lighthouse in a sea of complexity" (Mark Johnson, personal correspondence 2007). His description seems to capture what Critical Realism is all about: It is cross-disciplinary, it does not delimit itself to

any particular field of study, nor does it prescribe any particular methods. It is rather a basis for reflection, contributing to a clarification pertaining to epistemological and ontological issues, regardless of discipline, field or whatever phenomenon that is made into object of study.

When exploring a phenomenology of narratives, making what Csordas (1997:282) calls a methodological starting point in concrete immediacy, Critical Realism allows me to account for some basic features of the reality that I experience myself. What is more: it forces me to acknowledge and account for the same complexities in the realities of others. Critical Realism sensitizes me towards the lives of others as no less multidimensional than my own. Critical Realism points to the limits of methods and methodology: we can be wrong. When I say that we should approach what our informants say as relevant truth claims, it is *not* the same as saying that there is no reality apart from our constructions. It has to do with acknowledging that reality is multifaceted, that there are different ways of approaching, understanding and experiencing it. We are indeed part and parcel of reality. That's the very fact that makes our knowledge of this reality *situated*, with the limitations the situatedness implies. We can never grasp any phenomenon in its totality, merely probe into aspects of it. Our knowledge of reality is never finite.

Having an atheist point of departure has been treated as some kind of neutral position, one that has no need for explanation or verification. Archer points out how Atheism is the automatic default setting in academia: "Up to now in academic circles, the atheist has occupied a privileged position in all this plurality. Refraining from any beliefs about transcendent reality, atheism has appeared to be the position of value-neutrality in this arena, the rational default category against which all other beliefs are measured. Yet, not even atheism is immune from epistemic relativism. Atheism, as we indicated, reflects its own experience, the experience of the transcendent absent. It cannot then be held, as it so often has been, especially in anthropology and sociology that religion alone is something to be explained and not atheism as well" (Archer 2004:12). Based upon Critical Realism, asserting the ontologically objective existence of reality independent of our beliefs about it, Archer argues that "It follows that something may belong to reality even if we remain mistaken about it or even completely ignorant of it. The existence or non-existence of God is a paradigm case" (Archer 2004:1).

If we make religious beliefs into something that must be explained, while leaving the atheist point of departure unquestioned, this prepares the ground for the kind of violation I am addressing here. A key to solving this problem of violation, is acknowledging that atheist beliefs also come from somewhere. Only then can we make the analytical project into what Gupta says it ought to be: one of contemplating and forging links between different knowledges – all inevitably situated in a social reality with complex power-relations and hierarchy (1997). This guideline may not solve every challenge inherent in the analytical project, but it provides a basis that may cultivate an attitude of humility and reflection that our analyses benefit from. I do maintain that my job as a social scientist is not one of evaluating what my informants say on a scale of true or false. But taking an agnostic approach should not mean going to the opposite extreme. What my informants tell me are truth claims, no more and no less relevant than mine, and should be presented as such.

## **2.2 Preliminary investigations**

### **2.2.1 Seeking and New Age – the creation of an artifact**

When contemplating the implications of what I already knew about the Monday meditations, I tried to learn more by looking for relevant academic literature. I knew that seeking would manifest itself in a multitude of activities, as well as embracing certain modes of reflecting on the self and the world. However, when looking for academic literature addressing these phenomena, there was very little social anthropological literature to be found. I had to turn to the history of religion, where I found aspects of seeking addressed in literature about New Age. Vandeskog has made the same observation, pointing out what he calls the almost total absence of ethnographic descriptions of what is commonly categorized as alternativism and New Age (2001:189).

In the literature I found, New Age was pointed out as a *flourishing pluralism* with certain *common denominators*. I could recognize many of the activities that my fellow meditators had reported engaging in, when for instance Heelas points out elements of this pluralism as “meditation, the use of crystals, heeding channels, communing with nature, practicing spiritual healing, trying virtual reality equipment, taking celebratory-cum-inspirational holidays, participating in workshops, becoming involved with covens, camps, communes, austere spiritual paths, well organized new and not-so-new religious movements, or simply obtaining the cultural provisions (literature, music, drafts) which have proliferated in recent

times” (1999:1). He goes on mentioning “beliefs, practices and ways of life”, exemplified by “esoteric or mystical Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Taoism” along with “elements from “pagan” teachings including Celtic, Druidic, Mayan and Native American Indian”, as well as “Zen meditations, Wiccan rituals, enlightenment intensive seminars, management trainings, shamanic activities, wilderness events, spiritual therapies” and other “forms of positive thinking” (1999:1).

I could also recognize what Heelas claims as a remarkable constancy beneath the obvious heterogeneity, and I noted the emphasis he puts on *transformation* as a common denominator. He says that “one encounters the same (or very similar) lingua franca to do with the human (and planetary) condition and how it can be *transformed*. [ ] there is thus general agreement that it is essential to shift from [ ] what we are by virtue of socialization, to that realm which constitutes our *authentic nature*” (Heelas 1999:2, my emphasis). Similar governing ideas connecting a wide range of elements are teased out by Sky, who extracts the following as central to what she refers to as “the new religiousness”: For one, she says it does not make any distinction between God and Creation, but assumes that *the human being possesses an essential holiness in itself*. She says that the goal of new religious belief-systems and forms of therapy is to peel off cultural layers and reveal *the inner true potential* of the human being. Secondly, she points out the emphasis on *holism*, as ideas about reality are extracted from Hinduism and Buddhism, and what she calls the material world and the supernatural is understood as being of *the same essence*. A third element she points out is the thought that there is *no authority that stands over the individual* her/himself. She says that this does not mean that one cannot learn from reading books or taking classes and courses, but it means that the last instance of authority regarding truth is understood to be the individual her/himself. Last, but not least, Sky points out the fourth element as *eclecticism, the smorgasbord and the individual projects of picking and choosing* (Sky 2007:68, my emphasis).

This literature clearly addressed phenomena I had encountered at the Buddhist center, and it added interesting perspectives to my understanding of the Monday meditations. However, I also sensed alienation. There was something about the way the phenomena were portrayed that made them appear very different from the realities I had experienced at the Buddhist center. I sensed that something was lost. This something happened to be all that had been at stake for me when coming to the Buddhist center, this something happened to be what I had sensed as the most important aspects of what my fellow meditators had told me. I considered my perception of alienation a finding in itself: something must have happened along the way

that could have created such alienation. To me, this observation was an interesting phenomenon to pursue in itself. When trying to fill in what I perceived as a hole in the existing academic knowledge, I saw my task as not repainting the social landscapes in question, it was in fact one of painting a landscape that I could not find anywhere in existing literature. What is more, I needed to probe into what it was about the investigative procedures that could create such gaps between different kinds of knowledge in the first place. My aim developed from an interest in approaching the agendas of my fellow meditators, to also embracing how the investigative procedure in itself implies transformation. My intention was never to make any more complete analysis than had been done before. Indeed, I found the existing literature most insightful and well written in ways I could never compete with. I simply wanted to pursue different aspects of the realities in question, in a different manner, and, by doing so, maybe make a small addition to existing knowledge.

### **2.2.2 The creation of gaps**

I found that much of the existing literature tended to follow very similar patterns of writing. By assuming New Age as what Sutcliffe (2003) calls a *sui generis* entity, it kept slicing into issues from the very same angle, systematically opening up certain realms of enquiry at the exclusion of others, in ways that systematically set the stage for the kind of debates that could follow, as also pointed out by Judith Coney (2007). She says that scholars contribute to the making of histories, showing how we make selections based upon what we deem relevant, what fits in with our intellectual presuppositions, and the points that we are trying to make. She says that our scholarly accounts are structured in line with the assumptions of prevailing discourses, and points out how certain issues “come to assume overriding consideration” (2007:223-224). The text I am writing here is no less structured by prevailing assumptions and discourse than any other text. But as social anthropology and the history of religion are different disciplines, I have a different point of departure. What is more, my specific entry into these issues, as described in chapter one, had sensitized me towards other aspects of seeking than what the literature I found had addressed.

True, I found that there has been a historical development regarding how one has chosen to approach New Age in the history of religion. Sutcliffe exemplifies this development when he warns against assuming New Age as any *sui generis* movement or milieu, against any portrayal of a “more-or-less singular and homogeneous entity” (Sutcliffe 2003:3). Frisk is another representative of this development when she defines New Age as an umbrella-concept

that covers a vast amount of loosely connected ideational streams, that mainly origin from non-Christian sources, and says that “it is hard to define New Age as it borders on several phenomena such as ecology, feminism and humanistic psychology, as well as alternative medicine. In many ways New Age is a continuance of a long existing occult and metaphysical tradition, but differs from this through traits specific to our time. New Age can no longer be viewed as a marginal phenomenon, it can be said to be “an integral part of a new, truly pluralistic “mainstream”” (Frisk 1997, translated from Norwegian to English by me). This newer approach to New Age is in fact deconstructing the very concept. Sutcliffe can be understood as pointing out New Age as an artifact, created by the investigative procedure itself.

But the problematics I see attached to the concept of New Age do not stop there. The concept is also a most controversial one. When using the concept “New Age” my fellow meditators in general strongly and explicitly resented it, as to them it carried connotations of a light shopping-mentality they could not identify with. In some academic literature seeking was compared to picking and choosing in a candy-store. The picking and choosing of candy can hardly be understood as being of vital importance: it is rather a luxury of light indulgence. The metaphor of the candy-store captures how seeking entails extraction and annotation, in this sense it is a very good metaphor. But there are aspects of seeking it does not capture well. True, there is a market out there, in which there is buying and selling (Kraft 2001). A brief look at the magazine “Alternativt Nettverk” illustrates this point: courses being announced and artifacts of different kinds sold (Christensen 2005). But the fact that there is buying and selling must not be confused with people’s motives for, or experience with, engaging in the activities in question.

What is more, when it comes to the Buddhist groups I got to know during fieldwork, you could participate at meditations without paying a cent. Indeed, as a poor student I went to the Monday meditations for almost year without being charged. There could be courses arranged that cost money, but rarely more than what it costs to actually rent a place to make an arrangement, to make food, and/or to get teachers transported to Norway. When doing fieldwork I attended numerous meditations and talked to numerous people, who spent of their time and energy talking to me. No charge. On the contrary, I received books as well as other presents. Out of gratitude and a sense of decency I did donate money when possible, but this was my choice. The people I spoke to were not aware of me having given any money. The Buddhist groups that I got to know could not have existed without people engaging in a lot of



unpaid volunteer work. One of my informants pointed out that he often evaluated what he called the seriousness of courses based upon the cost as an indicator. He had been arranging courses for so many years, that he knew what such arrangements cost, what prices he could consider reasonable, and what prices he could consider suspicious, he told me. I am not making any statements about the seriousness of the activities in question, but to lump the Buddhist groups that I got to know together with weekend-courses amounting to several thousand Norwegian *kroner* does not account for important aspects of difference. There are indeed some different mechanisms at work.

However, what I find most problematic with the concept of New Age, is that to many people it carries associations to the superficial, it is frequently associated with McDonald'ist versions of discourses of the therapeutic, recovery and self-help, and can even be used at a derogatory concept. I have learnt so by listening to my informants, my colleagues, as well as by reading academic literature. I have indeed seen examples of what is referred to as New Age thinking presented as disqualifying per definition (Acorn 2004:160)<sup>10</sup>. When approaching people engaging in seeking, I am very reluctant to use a concept carrying such connotations. The association to superficiality in relation to people's life-stories does not make sense to me. It implies an understanding of certain people taking their lives less serious than others. Using any concept that undermines the seriousness of the lives of others is highly misleading and ethically wrong. Nobody that I have ever met take their own lives lightly. If it seems like somebody does, it is merely an illusion created by the fact that I don't know the person well enough. If I portray another person as superficial, it is rather a sign of *me* having only scratched the surface. The emotional imperatives behind seeking may intertwine with existential questions of a character no more superficial than those of any great philosopher.

Later, I would also learn that the shopping-metaphor also fails to grasp the fact that people sometimes do more than just taste. Some choose to link up to a certain tradition of Buddhism, and dedicate their lives to practice herein (or to other traditions, for that matter). Even when commodified, spiritual practices are commodities of a different kind than jellybeans. I am well aware that the metaphor of candy-store is not intended to capture every aspect of the phenomenon in question, and, as such, it is no better or worse than any other metaphor. It is

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<sup>10</sup> "The sensibility of restorative justice is drawn from a *whitewashing culture informed by New Age thinking* ("I love and affirm everything in the universe"), self-help ("what I hear you saying is..."), pop psychology's mantra that "revealing is healing", and a soft religion that, instead of seeing punishment as an integral part of processes of repentance and forgiveness, sees repentance and forgiveness as a substitute for punishment" (Acorn 2004:160). Acorn deconstructs restorative justice (a justice practise based on mediation rather than punitive or rehabilitating reactions) as representing "a *reductionism not allowing for the complexities of human personality and interaction*" (Acorn 2004, my emphasis).

the connotations to the superficial that I am concerned about, as it creates a gap – maybe the gap I find most disturbing – between the knowledge produced by the investigator, and the knowledge the seeker has of what is at stake in her/his quest of seeking.

### **2.2.3 Different perspectives, different knowledges**

Seeking was presented as a most personal and individual quest by my fellow meditators. The seeker can be understood as someone who tries out different activities and philosophies with the aim of finding her/his own truths. However, from a social scientific point of view, this seemingly individual project can also be understood as anything but individual. Seeking implies self inspection. Rose (1999) explores the phenomenon of self reflection in general. He maintains that through the choices we make we shape our lives – a seemingly obvious fact. However, he points out an irony in this “belief in our freely choosing our freedom”, as making choices implies the use of criteria and values generated in a social context (1999:10-11). Seeking, at one level presented as the highlight of individuality, the means by which a person uniquely designs herself and her life, carries aspects reaching far beyond any conceptions of the individual: “Through self-inspection, self-problematisation, self-monitoring and confession we evaluate ourselves according to the criteria provided for us by others. Through self-reformation, therapy, techniques of body alteration, and the calculated reshaping of speech and emotion, we adjust ourselves by means of the techniques propounded by the experts of the soul. The government of the soul depends upon our recognition of ourselves as ideally and potentially certain sorts of person, the unease generate by a normative judgment of what we are and could become, and the incitement offered to overcome this discrepancy by following the advice of experts in the management of the self” (Rose 1999:10-11).

Meditational techniques, along with the other activities my fellow meditators had reported participating in, bear strong resemblance to the therapeutic means Rose refers to. The idea of therapy implies ideas of health. And what is understood as constituting health always encloses social judgment, and searching for health implies acceptance of these judgments (Reizel 1970). Attending teachings like the Monday meditations does imply “following the advice of experts in the management of the soul” (Rose 1999). By “following the advice of experts” I am not just referring to being taught by people more experienced in meditation. I am referring to the ideas that made people consider it relevant to come to the Buddhist center in the first place. These are ideas characteristic of our time, according to Rose, derived from

certain understandings of what a person constitutes, which have been much influenced by what he refers to as the psy-sciences. According to Rose, the emphasis on the choosing individual pervades our time. He says it can be understood as a central aspect of contemporary government, which “operates through the delicate and minute infiltration of the ambitions of regulation into the very interior of our existence and experience as subjects” (Rose 1999:10-11). Seeking is in Rose’s terms a doorway into some of the processes by which the human subject weaves her/himself within webs of government, in a Foucauldian sense (Rose 1999). Rose illuminates how context is something at work within the object of study, not just around it. Deleuze (2006) uses the metaphor of *folds* and *folding* to explain the same phenomenon: by folding a fabric, inside becomes outside. Seeking can be seen as such a process of folding, and probing into seeking must necessarily break boundaries between micro- and macro-levels of enquiry.

Seeking constitutes a field of tension. It transcends distinctions between body and mind as it is about attitude as well as observable activities. Seeking also transcends distinctions between the individual and society. Not only does seeking take place in a social context, but the project of finding one’s own truths, which at an emic level is presented as individual per definition, is also a project whereby the individual can be understood as (re)creating her/himself as a socially constituted being. My field would have to be constructed in the intersection between language and embodiment, between sounds and silence, between movement and non-movement, between the social context and the individual, intensities and their extinction. Seeking can be viewed and experienced from different angles, which seem to produce very different, seemingly contradictory, kinds of knowledge. Approaching people’s stories about seeking as a social scientist is indeed a difficult balancing act, if the aim is to generate valid social scientific knowledge that does not create gaps between what Jackson (1996) calls the human consciousness in its lived immediacy, and what becomes of it when subjected to theoretical or conceptual systematizing. I cannot claim to have succeeded in doing so, but I can claim that this text is the result of wrestling with this challenge.

### 3. Towards a phenomenology of narratives

#### 3.1 *A narrative approach*

##### 3.1.1 Language and experience

The anthropologist approaching data in the form of language has by doing so told a story. Generally: About language as something that can be understood as an object of study. And more specifically: About certain ideas of why language as a study-object is relevant. Central to these ideas are the understandings of language as a doorway into grasping social reality. Bakhtin says that to study the word as such and ignoring the impulse that reaches out beyond it, is just as senseless as to study psychological experience outside the context of the real life toward which it is directed and by which it is determined (1991). Pålshaugen claims that it is hard to find a better model than language to illustrate how social context is not just around us, it pervades every aspect of our being (2001). We can be seen as dynamically linked to other voices across time and space through language and its dialogical nature (Bakhtin 1991).

When I talked with my informants, I would be listening to stories of experience. Refuting ideas of experience as “deep interiority sealed off from the world” (Csordas 1997:xii) is a prerequisite for making any claims of studying it. I find the theoretical point of departure that Csordas assumes interesting for my purposes. He sees language as neither masking nor veiling experience, but as disclosing it. He says that language is something man communicates himself *in*, not *by*, maintaining that it does not construct, but rather *encloses* being. He writes: “I reject the textualist bias of some semiotics that would ask, “How can you say you are writing about experience, when all your data are in the form of language?” This position presumes an unbridgeable gulf between language and experience, and is predicated on the notion that language can only be about itself – doubtless a hyper-Foucauldian exaggeration. On the contrary, language is not only a form of observable behavior, but a medium of inter-subjectivity, so that it is fair to say that language gives us authentic access to experience” (Csordas 1997:xii). Oakeshott says that “there is only one kind of experience, and reality is inseparable from it”, and continues: “No separation is possible between reality and experience; reality is experience and is nothing but experience. And, since experience is always a world of ideas, reality is a world of ideas. This conclusion, however, is open to a

misconception, which I must make haste to remove. In asserting that reality is experience and is a world of ideas, I do not intend to assert that reality is either a world of mere mental events or a world of mere ideas” (Oakeshott 1966:53-54)<sup>11</sup>.

I subscribe to the contextual understanding of experience maintained by Csordas and Oakeshott, and indeed, language and experience intertwine. However, for my purposes I have some concerns that I need to elaborate on a bit more. True, experience and language constitute a conglomerate that makes any attempt at clear division futile. Nevertheless I believe it is necessary to make some kinds of distinction. Seeing language as a means of disclosing experience, may (inadvertently) seem to imply free access to the experience of others. This is not so. Experience is always limited and strategic in its reporting. Attention has been drawn towards the limits of what can be reached by an investigator by way of language. Apart from the obvious phenomenon that people always make choices upon what they want to say, to whom, when, where and in what way, other aspects come in as well: there seem to be aspects of experience that are hard, if not impossible, to verbalize. The concept of the tacit dimension (Polanyi 1983) refers to the existence of embodied and non-verbal knowledge. And there is the problem of pain. Pain can be seen as resisting symbolization perhaps more than other somatic experiences. Pain has been described as “defying language, occurring on that fundamental level of bodily expression which language encounters, attempts to express, and then fails to encompass” (Good 1992). There are limits to what *is* being put into words, and there are limits to what *can* be put into words (Scarry 1985).

What is more, the narrator may not have total control over the words that are actually used: Pålshaugen says that thinking is not merely what he calls spirit, it is also matter. He says that “all thinking must be shaped in a certain material, and this material, the word, appears incapable of subordinating itself to the complete dominion of the idea” (Pålshaugen 2001:182). The issue becomes even more complex when understanding the body as part of the matter in which thinking will manifest itself. Rosaldo makes distinctions between thoughts, feelings and the body dissolve by the following definition: “Feelings are thoughts embodied, seeped with the apprehension ‘I am involved’” (Rosaldo 1984). The stories people

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<sup>11</sup> “Subject and object are not independent elements or portions of experience, they are aspects of experience which, when separated from one another, degenerate into abstractions. Every experience does not merely involve the holding together of a subject and an object, but is the unity of these, a unity which may be analysed into these two sides but which can never be reduced to a mere relation between them. There is, then, no object apart from a subject, no subject independent of an object. For again, an object is not something independent of experience, but merely what I am obliged to think, and for that reason is real. And the subject, the I, which belongs to this object, is not my body, nor a merely psychological subject, not (that is) an element or portion of my world, but is my whole world as a whole. And my world is a world of objects. The subject does not belong to my world, it is my world” (Oakeshott 1966:60)

tell, stories that immediately appear as composed of words, are not merely this appearance. Stories must be seen as “corporal acts; the body gives rise to narratives. And bodies are themselves narrated, discursive, inscribed; stories give rise to the body” (Young 1997:141). Living can be seen as an embodied mental process (Wollheim 1984). Narratives are embodied (Sarbin 2001). The material stories are made from, may be seen as encompassing being and experience in the fullest sense. Language and narratives can be understood as arising from life lived in its totality. A story about experience can be likened to the tip of an iceberg. There is more than meets the eye.

True, language, experience and the living body are not separate phenomena. But the existence of The Other is a phenomenon I approach as a fact. The Other, in Sartre’s terms, is not an object among objects, s/he constitutes her/his own center in a field of action. Østerberg says that perceiving another human being is to perceive a field of action within my own field of action – another “I”, another dative of manifestation. The de-centralization that takes place (Østerberg in Sartre 1994:23) implies limits to my understanding. Experience implies positioning in the social landscape: it has to be somebody’s experience we are talking about. The mere claim of approaching experience may be understood as entering a realm of power itself. This can become a very potent claim, as whatever then might be presented takes on a quality of authenticity. The claim itself may give the impression of breaking through to something genuine. And if something takes on the appearance of being genuine, it can hardly be made into a matter for dispute. Claiming to be approaching experience, without making clear whose experience, and the positioning in the social landscape this implies, will cover up central power-related features of the social reality we are dealing with. So does claiming to be approaching experience without making explicit the limits inherent in such an undertaking. If I want to avoid creating what Jackson calls a gap between human consciousness in its lived immediacy, and what becomes of it when subjected to theoretical or conceptual systematizing (Jackson 1996), I need to constantly relate to the fact that I can never grasp reality in its totality. Doing so has implications for how I understand the nature of my data-material, and what conclusions I believe I can draw from it.

### **3.1.2 Narrative interviewing**

When I engage in so called narrative interviewing, it is with an understanding of me as part of what is going on. Young says, that the realm of conversation, which constitutes the setting for storytelling, has its own ontological status, and she points out how “its organization is not

appropriately broken down into tracings of the individual”, referring to Merleau-Ponty: “Our traces mix and intermingle; they make a single wake of “public durations” (Merleau-Ponty 1964). “Talking” and “listening” are concepts reflecting a separation of events that can be seen as two processes intricately intertwined” (Young 1987:162). I wanted to produce data-material in the form of *life-stories*. The concept of life-story does not refer to the composition of an autobiography; it refers to stories about some life-experience resulting from narrative interviewing by a research scholar, or as “first-person account by respondents of their experience” (Riessman 1993). This definition incorporates my presence and influence as a researcher: I ask questions, I give verbal comments as well as feedback through tone of voice, facial expressions and body language. But I also try to create a space in which my partner in conversation can elaborate upon her/his experience. I may have a list of issues that I want to introduce, but after having introduced an issue I listen carefully and follow up what my partner in conversation says, generating questions from there.

Narrative interviewing differs from ordinary conversation in that I consciously try to talk less and listen more: even if talking and listening intermingle, there is still talking and there is still listening. If I keep interrupting my partners in conversation, if I spend most of the time talking myself, if I keep forcing the attention towards my interests alone, my partner in conversation would have less of a chance to finish their lines of reasoning, less of a chance to bring up issues other than those I had managed to think of beforehand. If I had stuck to a list of pre-made questions that I kept asking instead of following up what my informants told me along the way, I would have lost the opportunity to explore new trails of reasoning unfolding.

Narrative interviewing has nothing to do with removing the influence of the researcher. It has to do with relating consciously towards this very fact. No matter how I relate I am part of the conversation going on. But there are different ways of relating, and every way of relating has implications for how the conversation unfolds. If I tango, my partner cannot waltz. If I pause, I might find out that the other person wants to tap-dance. There are no clear definitions of, or recipes for, narrative interviewing. The concepts of day and night have no clear definitions either, yet the distinction is most useful. Blurry borderlines *per se* are not an argument for discarding a concept. Being aware of the complex dynamics at work and how we are part of them, calls for an awareness regarding your own moves, and the necessity of making space for another human being in the realm of conversation. Narrative interviewing can be seen as *a sensitizing concept*: how I choose to relate to my partner in conversation has implications.

I have used the term partner in conversation. The expression is used to emphasize the aspect of joint venture towards which narrative interviewing strives. Yet the term partner may be misleading. True, a clear division between talking and listening cannot be made. But merely to dissolve the division between individuals participating in the conversation may make it difficult to attend to certain aspects of power. One person may be in a position to lay the premises upon which conversation is performed (as is the case for instance in the dialogue between doctor and patient (Eide 1997)). If one were merely to address the way narratives are constructed between people in such a manner that a narrator and a listener no longer can be separated, one would be neglecting a central part of social reality: whose premises the dialogue might be performed upon. There is an interesting tension here, between the analytic gaze that performs a blurring of lines and categories, and the analytic necessity of grasping relations between parts that may hold opposing interests. Merely performing a blurring of lines between participants may become an act of power itself. There are different people in the realm of conversation. This implies an existence of different perspectives, different insights and different knowledges, as well as potential diverging interests and power-relations. The term partner in conversation is good as a sensitizing concept, accounting for conversation as an event of interaction, and the openness we should strive for when conducting interviews. But the same term may inadvertently divert attention away from aspects relating to power, and because of its egalitarian connotations, it can be dangerously deceiving.

### **3.1.3 On life-stories**

I will be using the term life-stories a lot in this text, which calls for clarification. Storytelling, to cite Riessman, is what we do with our research materials and what informants do with us: the story-metaphor emphasizes that we create order, that we construct texts in particular contexts. Narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself (Riessman 1993:1). According to Polkinghorne, the most inclusive meaning of narrative refers to any spoken or written presentation. He says that the concept of narrative can refer to the process of making a story, to the cognitive scheme of the story, or to the result of the process – also called stories, tales, or histories (Polkinghorne 1988:13). Different analytic approaches objectify different aspects of the total textual formation (Hanks 1999:102). Røssaak discerns how the study of narrative is a phenomenon that does not fit neatly within the boundaries of any single scholarly field. He says that the awakening interest in narrativity was part of the linguistic turn within the sciences that took place in the sixties, one of the elements within an even larger turn, viz. the post modern (Røssaak 1999:2), and points out how the concept of



narration was re-conceptualized as narrative analysis became assimilated into the social-science research agenda.

Somers claims that there has been a shift from focus on *representational* to *ontological* narrativity. She says that this means that from conceiving of narrative modes of representing knowledge as “representational forms imposed on the chaos of lived experience”, narrative is understood as an ontological condition of social life. From this perspective stories can be seen as seeping through our being in every dimension, and experience becomes a phenomenon constituted through narratives. Somers says that this shift was an answer to a recurring problem of an inadvertent tendency to essentialize, as introducing narrativity is a way of incorporating the categorically destabilizing dimensions of time, space and relationality into being (Somers 1994). The same aspect of narrativity is emphasized by Bertaux: He points out that life-stories provide a unique access to the historical character of human beings and social forms, to their temporal dimensions as processes in the making, to what he emphasizes as “the active component of human beings as co-actors of their own destiny and shapers of their social environment” (Bertaux 2002 – my emphasis). The understanding of life-stories as spatio-temporal constructs (Knudsen 1990) infuses the phenomenon with fluidity and contributes to a depiction of the human being as an active bricoleur, an inventor. Emphasis is put upon being as process in the making. Narrativity functions as an antidote against tendencies to essentialization.

Life-stories have been defined as “stories about some life experience that is of deep and abiding interest to the interviewee” (Chase 1995:2). This definition is a bit difficult, as experience is not static, and whatever is considered to be of deep and abiding interest may vary over time. Some life events are never considered to be of deep and abiding interest, and yet they can be narrated. I don’t see how the narration of events considered uninteresting by the narrator should not also fall under the category of life-story. However, for any kind of experience to be narrated during a conversation, the story-teller must bother to do so, not to mention *remember* the events in the first place. To do so, a minimum of focus must have been directed towards whatever phenomenon that is being narrated: the minimum required for it to become integrated in a story. As such I guess it might be fair to say that life-stories are about events that have a certain minimum of interest to the narrator, compared to experience that is never elaborated upon, events that are not being told, due to their lack of relevance to the narrator. There is something that I do like about Chase’s definition, though. Which is: it emphasizes the necessity of an approach that opens up for the elaborations of the interviewee,

it urges the researcher to listen and make room for whatever the interviewee finds interesting. The role of the interviewer becomes one of being sensitive towards whatever twists and turns the informant makes, and following these up as much as possible.

Riessman's definition of life-stories as stories about some life-experience resulting from narrative interviewing by a research scholar, or as first-person account by respondents of their experience, is a rather ad-hoc definition. And I believe it is the best way to define life-stories. This definition embraces the fact that life-stories are not to be found in the singular, that they are not static entities, and that the researcher plays a part in the conversation. This definition also indicates the futility of defining any beginning or end to life-stories: the more you talk to a person, the more the person will be able to tell you. Bertaux uses an elegant metaphor. He says that life-stories are like wine. Even if you pour only a tiny a drop of it into a cup, it is still wine – even though there is more where it came from (2002). Yet, a bottle of wine will eventually become empty. Life-stories, however, come from a source that never dries out. There will always be more. Maybe the Biblical story about the widow of Sarepta provides an even better metaphor: the cruse of oil that could not be emptied. One can know a person for a lifetime, one can talk to her/him every single day; and yet the source will never become dry. So much less so when the stories told are the results of brief meetings between almost strangers – as is the case when I talk to my informants. Which calls for humility regarding what one can say something about and what one cannot say something about from such data-material.

And yet, the richness of the life-story still provides endless opportunities for exploration. Tasting a tiny drop of wine can reveal a story about the reality in which the wine was produced. Connoisseurs can even tell from where the wine comes, and what year the crop was grown. There is a story in Hinduism and Buddhism, about the Jewel Net of Indra; a web of silken strands which spans across space infinitely in every direction. Every intersection hosts a shining luminous pearl. The surface of every pearl completely reflects every other, and the net as a whole. Likewise, each reflected pearl in itself reflects every other, with the process continuing *ad infinitum*<sup>12</sup>. Life-stories can be likened to these pearls of Indra, providing a beautiful metaphor capturing how context is something that is at work within them, the whole reflected in every little part.

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<sup>12</sup> Galidakis, I.N: "Indra'a net of pearls", <http://ioannis.virtualcomposer2000.com/optics/indra.html> , last accessed 2007-10-29.

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## 3.2 *Tracing multiplicities: beyond construction*

### 3.2.1 The aspect of intersubjectivity

Life-stories arise from bodies immersed in the world. However, life-stories are also phenomena that require bodies to be understood: narrative analysis is more than relating to the fact that something is being said. The potential stories have of *touching us* constitutes an important part of what allows us to understand: Noy points out that any good story has an essence of moving the listener-participant. He says: “It is inter-subjective, dynamic and active, and at its core it influences and manipulates the hearer, the interlocutor, via its dialogical operation between the participants in the narration occasion” (Noy 2002). Jackson says, “Speaking does not spring from knowledge of grammar any more than good research is an outcome of methodological training or good workmanship is guaranteed by reading how-to-do-it books” (1996), concluding that more goes on in the act of analysis than what can be made explicit, and always will. As researchers, we are bodies inserted every bit as much in the world as whatever phenomenon we are studying. The complexities and potentials of fieldwork lie precisely herein. This is not only the case when engaging in so-called participant observation: *we are no less part of our bodies when conducting narrative interviewing.*

Steeves says, that “reading involves becoming absorbed in the world of fiction, virtually exploring the experiences of the characters, inhabiting their virtual bodies and participating in their virtual encounters. Over time a mode of existence arises from the pages” (2004:65). Understanding the stories people tell us, implies the same inhabitation of virtual bodies and virtual encounters. Allowing the Story to do its thing is making the listener into a participant by means of the involvement created. Listening to the story becomes more than merely listening. Young (1987) picks up on this theme when she depicts the listener as slipping between absorption to abstraction, when she explores what she refers to as the phenomenology of narratives. Here the construction of the story holds a central place, understood as being part of what she refers to as the Story-Realm. However, Young claims, stories, themselves being events in a conversation, direct attention to another realm of events not in the conversation, and this is the Tale-World. The concepts of Tale-World and Story-Realm allow for a distinction between two diametrically opposed aspects that narrative analyses balance between, two poles that are both essential to our understanding of stories told: As researchers, we observe the fact that construction is going on, and the way it is

performed. We discern patterns and extract themes and elements. However, the analysis does not stop there. The construction of stories is conceived of as having the potential for transporting you from the Story-Realm into the Tale-World. This puts focus upon, and gives a name to, the potential language has of functioning as a means and not an end, of making the reader experience new modes of existence, as Steeves puts it. Analysis is depicted as a continuous movement, between seeing the story as a construction, as well as letting the construction fade out of focus, and allowing the story to do what it tries to do: transfer you to the Tale-World. A phenomenological perspective, attached to the immersion of the body into reality, is here being used within the realm of storytelling. Listening to stories is depicted as a process of participation where all senses can be seen as involved.

This dance between absorption and abstraction sounds strangely familiar. It leads my mind to the distinction between deep and shallow play Geertz makes in his classic “Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” (2000), the former referring to deep experiential and emotional engagement in the action taking place, the latter referring to a situation characterized by more inattentiveness. The concepts of deep and shallow play can be seen as belonging to a different order of description than the concepts of Tale-World and Story-Realm. This does not, in my opinion, make the analogy irrelevant, as the aim is directing focus to the importance of different modes of being present, and how such different modes, precisely because of the different kinds of knowledge they may produce, are equally important in the grasping of what the phenomenon approached is all about. An emphasis on different modes of being present points at the analytical project as one of forging links between different knowledges. Not only between different knowledges from different geographical locations or the perspectives of different individuals, but different knowledges generated according to the gaze utilized, embracing dialogical processes within the individual as well, who thus becomes a di-vidual. What is more: the generation of knowledge is portrayed as one of dynamic movement, not just as a one-dimensional accumulation of ‘facts’ added together.

What Kapferer calls “the multiple selves of a “normal”, healthy individual”, might be used as a model of what goes on when slipping in and out between Tale-Worlds and Story-Realms. I can apply Kapferer’s description of ritual activity, with only minor modifications: this “I” that is being transported to the Tale-World, is then reflected upon by the “me”, when slipping back into the Story-Realm. By so doing, the entry into the Tale-World can be understood as providing perspectives on the phenomenon of narrative that a mere focus on the Story-Realm cannot provide. As different “I’s” can be seen as projected into the Tale-World, this seems to

provide a model for aspects of the inter-subjective workings of language. The same way as “ritual performance affords individuals the opportunity to stand apart from themselves, to objectify their own experience and those of others, to be an audience to themselves and to others, and to act reflexively” (free rewriting of Kapferer 1984:188), the analytical process can be seen as one allowing for related processes. Stories are phenomena that can be experienced in the fullest sense. And should be experienced in the fullest sense, as this is a central feature of what stories set out to do.

### **3.2.2 Stories: transitive and intransitive dimensions**

Young talks about stories as conjuring up Tale-Worlds. She draws up a multidimensional reality, having implications for how we must approach the phenomenon of narratives. The “flatness” of constructivist models (Daniel 1996:14) is replaced by a phenomenology infusing narratives with multidimensionality, with participants dynamically interacting, moving between absorption and abstraction, transporting between different realms of experience.

There is another aspect, however, that Young does not touch upon: the distinction between life-stories and fictional stories. Both have the potential of conjuring up Tale-Worlds, as such there is no difference. In fact, to the listener this difference may be non-existent. But to the person narrating her/his experiences, there is a difference. There is a big difference to me between telling about my lack of hormones, and the making up of a bedtime story for a little child. Indeed, that is why the concept of life-story is relevant. It makes a distinction: Between stories a person can tell from her life, as opposed to fairy-tales, short stories, novels, etc. I am quite aware that this distinction is problematic – any distinction is, when the analytical gaze is put upon it. Stories about others and fictional stories can function as metaphors to communicate central aspects of a person’s experience (Eide 1997). Any distinction drawn between the informant’s own story and stories s/he tells about others dissolve. However, this way of understanding life-stories takes quite an analytical effort to get at. The analytical gaze may blur distinctions, and thereby grasp certain aspects of the reality we are dealing with. But the narrator experiences a difference that makes a difference, between the telling of events from her life and the telling of a fairy-tale.

True, in telling about an event from my life, I can tell different stories about what happened, even contradictory ones – ambiguity can be a central part of experience. I can also enter realms of storytelling in the twilight zone between telling white lies and facts, and being very

conscious about doing so. But, there are limits to what kind of versions I can tell without leaving some essential aspect of experience behind. To the listener it can be difficult to tell the difference. But to the narrator, the life-story carries with it an experience of *aboutness* that differs from that of a fairy-tale. The life-story introduces what may be termed an empirical dimension that differs from that of a fairy-tale.

Daniel points out different modes of relating reality to language. The most common one being that language represents something (in the sense that if I say the word “table”, it represents the object table), which according to Daniel is “the understandings you find in the Supreme Court Commission’s report, the newspapermen’s stories, and the writ petitions: It stresses the aboutness of language. This representational view of language, in its naïve form, has been rightly taken to task by language philosophers, among others. It would be wrong, however, to assert that language is totally unrepresentative. Language does represent whatever object it claims to represent (and more), but only in some respects and not in others, in some capacities and not in others, and to somebody or something and not to others. This modified representational view flows into a second theory of language-object relationship that has been posited. This may be called the constitutive theory of language. Whereas the first affords primacy to the object, the thing referred to, the second vests constitutive powers in the subject or, in the more sophisticated version, in the intersubjective discursive patterns, in at consensual community, or in the system of shared meanings. Some of us call the latter culture” (Daniel 1996:127).

To the narrator the aboutness of the life-story differs from that of a fairy-tale. Ignoring this distinction is to overrule the narrator’s knowledge of her reality. The narrator’s understanding and experience of composing life-stories is a form of knowledge in itself. I work from the central tenet of phenomenology, which is that “the field of empirical study includes the plurality of all experienced facts, regardless of how they are conceived and classified” (Jackson 1996:7). I understand my job as one of “grasping this knowledge, contemplating it, not replacing it” (ibid 1996:7). Daniel says that constructivism flattens down culture “to a single dimension and a loss of perspective on the relative differences in resilience among the various cultural constructions as well as their relative latency (or depth, as some would prefer to call it)” (Daniel 1996:14). He says that constructivism misses out on a *difference that makes a difference*: “Some cultural constructions are sturdy but obvious and others obvious but fragile – both sorts revealing their constructedness on the slightest reflection even to those who live in and with them. Some constructions, though

inconspicuous (or latent) may be either quite impermanent or quite resilient, both concealing not only their constructedness but possibly even their very presence” (Daniel 1996:14). A fairy-tale is the kind of construction that reveals its constructedness on slight reflection to those telling it. A life-story, on the other hand, does not lend itself to deconstruction that easily – to the person living it.

I said that a central tenet in Critical Realism is the independence of the world in relation to our thoughts about it, and I introduced the distinction made between the intransitive and transitive dimensions of knowledge. Life-stories are part of the transitive dimension of knowledge. Interview a family about their holiday together, and you will find different versions of what took place. But the matter of fact aspects of what took place during the holiday is part of the intransitive dimension: For instance, going to Australia in July, taking a bus from Adelaide to Alice Springs etc. These are facts in the sense that they were events that could have been observed and verified by anybody present at the time they took place, and it is possible to find track records of the events in questions. Though themselves part of the transitive dimension, life-stories are characterized by the aboutness that so intimately link them up to the intransitive dimension, from which they arise.

When conducting narrative analysis I take an agnostic approach: I am not a criminal investigator, I am not trying to discern truth from lies. My task is not to judge what is told on any scale of truthfulness. In this sense I approach narratives as phenomena in themselves. There is a difference, however, between doing so with an acknowledgement of the intransitive dimension the narrator relates to, and discarding the intransitive dimension altogether. If I discard the intransitive as a dimension central to the experience of my informants, and thus to the stories they tell, I am treating what they are telling me as irrelevant as truth claims. By doing so, I am committing a particular kind of violence:

Approaching a life-story is ultimately about relating to another experiencing human being by means of language. The way I choose to relate to the utterance of The Other is something Skjervheim (1996) addresses as an act in itself. He points out the difference between merely noticing the fact that something has been said, rather than responding to the contents of what is being said as such. Let me explain: If the argument is picked up, the content of the story may be disputed, but the content must still be related to somehow. Even disagreeing with the content will force one to pick up on the argumentative – we might be negating, but the negation also contains the negated element. Opposite to this would be an approach to

language as merely a form of observable behavior, ignoring the argument within what is being uttered. When this happens, language is stripped of its potential for creating common ground; the storyteller and the listener are left in different worlds with only superficial contact. “The Other is transformed into a fact, a mere object in this world” (Skjervheim 1996:75, my translation). If I treat what my informants are telling me as irrelevant truth claims, I strip language of its potential to create common ground. I commit an objectification of The Other.

There are no definite recipes for how to conduct narrative analysis, just as little as there are recipes for how to relate to other human beings in general. There will always be an element of improvisation present. But being aware of how narrative analysis constitutes a fundamental act of balance may in itself contribute to an awareness needed to do justice to the complexities of a multidimensional reality. It is necessary to move beyond construction when understanding the life-story as a phenomenon. I see phenomenology as having valuable and important contributions in this regard, with its emphasis on experience, immediacy, the body. I also find the distinction Critical Realism introduces, between transitive and intransitive dimensions as invaluable to do justice to the aboutness of life-stories, to grant our informants the status of making truth-claims every bit as much relevant as ours, and placing the theories of social science in the transitive dimension, where life-stories belong. In this text I will be unfolding realms of enquiry, reflecting upon this enterprise as such, as well as pointing to how my informants are engaging in unfolding as well: realms of enquiry, and lives to be lived. In this text I will trace life-stories as phenomena arising from bodies immersed in the world, posing very specific analytical potentials and challenges. This is what I mean by exploring a phenomenology of narratives.



## 4. Operationalization, delimitation and tentative tracings

### 4.1 *Learning and adjusting*

#### 4.1.1 Some facts

During my preparation for fieldwork, I learnt that the place with the little house and the Gumpa, Karma Tashi Ling, abbreviated KTL, was part of a larger organization: Karma Tashi Ling Buddhist Society, abbreviated KTLBS. In this text I will use these abbreviations. KTLBS is just one of several different Buddhist traditions represented in Norway. Of these, KTLBS as well as a few others are organized in an umbrella organization called *Buddhistforbundet*, which translates into The Buddhist Society. Most of these groups are located in Oslo, though some of them have daughter groups other places. Finding this out fit me perfectly. This meant that I could use more than one location as points of departure, for finding people who might be my informants as well as learning about different kinds of Buddhist practice. I would have a better chance of finding enough informants, and it would make the task of anonymization easier. The fact that the groups represented different branches of Buddhism could also provide variation to play upon in my analysis, even though this would not constitute an object of study as such. There were also Buddhist groups that were not organized in The Buddhist Society. But for practical reasons (time and money) I decided to use groups that would comply with two criteria: they had to be members of The Buddhist Society, and they had to be located in Oslo.

From a brochure provided from The Buddhist Society (1999) I got some basic information. It said that The Buddhist Society embraced eight Buddhist organizations, counting a total of 7214 members. This was in 1999, the numbers have increased since then<sup>13</sup>. The largest two were the Vietnamese and the Thai Buddhist groups, or rather societies, as the Vietnamese counted 5230 members, and the Thai 1233. Then there was Karma Tashi Ling Buddhist Society with 356 members, the Rinzai Zen Center with 95 members, The Dharma Group with

<sup>13</sup> In the newsletter from the Buddhist Society number 1, 2007, the total number of members is reported to be ten thousand. These members were distributed among the following groups: the Vietnamese 5071, the Thai 3290, KTLBS 581, the Burmese 283, no specific belonging 222, Tisarana 157, Rinzai Zen Center 116, the Dharma group 105, Hridaya 45, Dharma Sah 41, Stavanger Buddhist forening 38, Friends of the Western Buddhist order 32, Buddhasasana 20.

61 members, and Dharma Sah, 44 members. Something called Tisarana *kultur- og utdannelsesforbund* (Tisarana society of culture and education) was listed in the papers I got from The Buddhist Society as counting 75 members, but when I started up fieldwork they turned out not to be an active organization. The Theravada group counted merely three members at the time I did my fieldwork.

I started out by contacting the different groups/societies in the order they were listed in the brochure. First I wrote letters explaining my project, and asked permission to talk to the person listed as a spokesperson. I also mentioned the possibility of participating in the activities of the group later on. A couple of weeks later I made a call as announced in the letter. On the phone I had many conversations I found both interesting and enjoyable. Sometimes the lack of conversation provided information as well: When calling the Vietnamese and Thai groups, I found it difficult to find contact persons who spoke Norwegian, or even English. Furthermore, the persons listed as contact persons in the brochures were no longer so. After a number of confusing calls it became clear to me that these two organizations differed from the others. These organizations were mainly made up of people who originated from Vietnam and Thailand, whereas the other groups had been founded by Norwegians, and their further development was colored by this fact. One more delimitation was made: As my preoccupation was seeking, I chose to focus on the groups that were founded by Norwegians. Interviews that I conducted later on indicated that also my informants considered these groups as different from the others:

*“The Vietnamese society is by way the largest one. Many of the groups and societies are mere traditions of practice, while the Vietnamese is more ethnic in many ways. Basically it is Zen Buddhism, but it differs a bit from Chinese and Japanese Zen. I have not had that much contact with them”.*

There were also other groups I did not choose. As the Tisarana society of culture and education was not active at the time I was doing fieldwork, they were not an option. And the Theravada group was located in Tønsberg, quite a travel from Oslo, so apart from a brief (but most memorable) visit, I didn't have the opportunity to participate in the meditations here. However, the conversations I had when visiting provided much interesting information that I will be extracting from in this text. In spite of small numbers, the threesome that constituted the Theravada group, were people who have been, and still are, quite central to the Buddhist environment.

I considered KTLBS a must to follow. For one, KTL had been my first encounter with Buddhism. Following up by spending more time here might provide interesting comparative perspectives in itself. Secondly, it was the biggest of the groups that had been founded by what for want of a better term may be called ethnic Norwegians. KTLBS had also expanded since my first encounter. In addition to having more members, it now had a total of three different locations at its disposal, of which KTL was only one. I needed locations in which I could place my body and navigate from, so that suited me just perfectly. Furthermore, KTLBS arranged many courses and activities, occasions for many people to visit, and occasions for me to participate. The large number of visitors coming to these arrangements also made it easier to make my informants anonymous. When having decided upon KTLBS, the groups I had left to choose between were the Rinzaï Zen Center, Dharma Sah and the Dharma group. To anticipate events: I ended up following some of the activities at the Dharma group in addition to KTLBS. However, before doing so I had spent some time in Oslo. I had met and interviewed the people listed as contact persons, and I had tentatively attended meditations at all the groups. Through these encounters I learnt a bit more, providing the basis upon which the final decisions of delimitation could be made:

Not only did the Dharma group and KTLBS represent two different traditions of Buddhism. But how they related to the phenomenon of tradition differed. The aim of the Dharma Group is, “to create a Norwegian Buddhism, where exotic traits are reduced to a minimum, while retaining the essence” (from the brochure “Buddhismen i Norge” 1999, my translation). At the time, this declaration of creating a Western version of Buddhism was specific to the Dharma group. None of the other groups in the Buddhist Society had this explicit aim<sup>14</sup>. Because of this, the Dharma group and KTLBS could allow for an interesting variation to play upon in my analysis. True, all the groups turned out to have their specific, distinguishing features. But the issue pertaining to tradition was not just about a difference between the Dharma group and KTLBS. It was an issue that surfaced *every time* I spoke to *all the teachers*, regardless of what tradition they represented. The different ways that the Dharma group and KTLBS related to tradition were manifestations of a much more general debate, issues of much more general relevance.

When talking on the phone to the people listed as contact persons, we made appointments for further interviews. I chose to begin by meeting the leaders and teachers in the groups. I

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<sup>14</sup> Later on the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order was established in Norway, having the same aim. But at that time I was nearing the end of my fieldwork.

wanted more information on the specific groups and the tradition of Buddhism that they represented. I wanted a historical context, an outline of the developments over time, as well as learning how the groups worked today. People's understandings of their history, their specific tradition of Buddhism and how the groups worked would give me a better understanding of what went on today, and provide me with clues regarding how to proceed. These initial interviews were also occasions to introduce myself and ask permission to attend meditational gatherings. From the first information I got on the telephone, I realized that it was impossible to visit all the groups on a regular basis. Some of them would have their gatherings simultaneously, and I could not possibly be two places at once. For instance, Dharma Sah and the Dharma group both had their meditations on Tuesdays, participating at a meditation at one of these groups would automatically exclude participation at the other. I could have chosen to go to different places every time, alternating between them, though. But, given my agenda, I decided that spending more time at one place would provide more valuable information. It would also be easier to get to know people if I saw them on a more regular basis, at least enough to comfortably ask them to become my informants.

In addition to preparing the more formal interviews, I prepared a letter of information to the informants whose life-stories and personal reflections I would zoom into. In this letter I explained my project, and asked if they would consider being an informant. In the letter I made it clear that they were free to leave at any time, free to withdraw the information they already had provided, and no questions would be asked. I also promised that wherever quoted, they would be consulted before publishing the text. I needed their consent and feedback, to secure the ethical aspects of my project, and such feedback could be useful to my analysis as well. I emphasized that there would be no hurt feelings on my behalf if they chose to say no, and that even though the information they could provide was of great interest, my project would not fall to pieces if they withdrew. I did not want any concern for my wellbeing to put pressure on people. When giving people the letter, I gave them a few days to think about it before answering. And before starting the interview, I made certain that they had signed a paper of informed consent. However, as I got more experience with this kind of interviewing, these proceedings turned out to be overkill. In fact, being so careful could have the opposite effect of what was intended: if I had no mysterious, secret agenda, why all this precaution? Because of this I loosened a bit on my proceedings. I no longer asked people to sign a paper of consent before talking to me, their verbal approval after having received the letter sufficed. I also made certain by repeating orally that they could 'stop the press' at any

time, and that I would contact them to get their approval regarding how I decided to use their stories.

I kept my promises. Before finalizing this text, I sent a draft to each of my informants, to give them the chance to provide feedback, to express acceptance or non-acceptance, to let me know if they had been misquoted, misunderstood or misused. This does not mean that they have censored the contents. I did contemplate potential dilemmas between ethical considerations and the importance of independent research. But it turned out to pose no problem. Nobody attempted to steer my research. Instead I received valuable clarification regarding things they had said, or concepts that they had used, that I might have misunderstood when transcribing the interviews. And I could receive explanations that added to my understanding of the specific kind of tradition they represented, or useful feedback regarding how my choice of words could have unintentional effects, thus allowing me to choose a different way of expressing my intentions. I am also very grateful for the support and encouragement I was provided with, by the feedback I received.

After having read my draft, some of my informants suggested that when I retold historical events, as the genesis of the different Buddhist groups, I should use the full names of the people involved. This is a suggestion I followed up, after having made certain that the people I had spoken to, who were implicated by this decision, agreed. But otherwise I have kept my informants anonymous. I keep coming back to the issue of making my data-material anonymous. This is not because I believe I ended up with any especially sensitive information. I rather believe that the stories I was told were stories that they had told versions of before, stories that constituted part of their public story-books, not the kind that would have been told to a close friend. When talking to teachers or other people central to the Buddhist environment, some personal information would even be common knowledge, already part of the public history of the Buddhist environment, or available to anyone who might be interested in asking. Some of the information may not be common knowledge, but that does not necessarily mean it has any particular sensitivity associated with it. The reason why I keep coming back to the issue of anonymity is that I promised to do so before each interview I had. The principle better safe than sorry is a good one. Furthermore, I was also committed by the agreement with NSD, Norsk Samfunnvitenskapelig Datatjeneste, who supervises ethical aspects of social scientific research, to assure proper anonymization.

### 4.1.2 Practicalities and organizing fieldwork

I divided my fieldwork up in two main time periods. The first six months I spent participating at meditations, getting to know people enough to give them the letter of information, as described above. The next six months I conducted interviews with the people that had agreed to be my informants. I also planned on doing some follow-up interviews the next year, which I did do, but not to the extent I had planned, as I saw that I ran the risk of drowning in data-material. As I was not studying any monastery or village featuring accommodation, I had to figure out where to stay. Money was scarce, and hotels were out of the question. I had to rely on friends and relatives letting me stay at their place. The time would be spent joining gatherings and activities at different Buddhist groups. During the day most people were at work, like anybody else, so it was mainly afternoons, evenings and weekends that I was at work. To save my personal friendships from being ruined from over-exposure, as well as giving myself an opportunity to contemplate, write and make further plans for fieldwork, I went to Bergen on a regular basis, about once a month. In phase number two, interviewing people, I would spend my time in Bergen calling informants, setting times and dates for interviews, so that my week was fully scheduled when coming to Oslo. In Bergen I also transcribed interviews I had already conducted.

I divided my production of data-material into two categories, to production of *background material* and *main data-material*. Background material was the material generated by participating in meditations and courses, as well as interviews with teachers and other people central to the Buddhist groups. My main data-material was intended to be stories about seeking, generated through conversations with seekers, performed with their knowledge and explicit consent. I made the distinction between background material and main data-material for several reasons. For one, I wanted to emphasize that when participating in meditations and courses, it was *not* to study people, but to study *among* people. I came to listen, learn and participate like the others, not to focus on and/or take detailed notes of individuals present. My participation was intended as a means of generating further understanding of the teachings and meditational techniques, valuable information to probe into aspects of transformation in itself, as well as a way of generating a better background for understanding what my informants were talking about. I also defined the conversations with teachers and other people central to the Buddhist environment as background material, as these conversations were intended to provide information on the specific tradition of Buddhism their group represented, the history of the group/society itself, and how the group functioned and

practiced today. This information was intended as a map for navigating the social landscapes in question, to find informants, and to add to my understanding of their stories. Neither Buddhism nor Buddhist organizations have been my objects of study as such.

However, when starting out fieldwork, I ended up talking to some teachers and other central people about their spiritual CV's and seeking as well. (The expression spiritual CV was used by one of my informants, and I find it very appropriate). Often when I talked with people, enjoyable and good conversation would develop (at least I found it to be so), in which I got most useful information of a more personal character as well. Very often (not surprisingly) such personal information would intertwine with the information on the formation of the groups, as these informants had often been initiators in these processes. In other words, despite of what I had planned initially, I ended up with spiritual CV's of both people in the periphery of the Buddhist environment, as well as spiritual CV's of some of the people who were central to it. This meant that the issue of anonymity had to be dealt with through different means than originally planned. I had planned taking care of anonymity primarily by switching the names of the people I spoke to, as the large number of people visiting the Buddhist groups would make it impossible to trace the stories back to certain individuals. But now I also had data-material that could not be made anonymous that way. Merely changing the name of a Buddhist teacher in such a small environment would be pointless, anybody in the environment would know who I was quoting anyway. The solution became one of dividing and editing these interviews more radically than the other interviews. However, doing so is also a way of treating the data-material that has implications for what kind of analysis that can be done. These are issues I will be returning to in later chapters.

## ***4.2 Delimitation – a two-way street***

I was generally met with a positive attitude by my fellow meditators. Their reactions to my project could be “how interesting!”, “how fun!” and “I would have loved to do the same!” whereupon people often started talking about seeking enthusiastically, without even having been asked to do so. Having said that, I also have to say that I did not run up to people uncritically, asking them to become my informants. I made conscious choices, based upon the communication that developed. Some people I did not even begin communicating with, as they did not signal any interest in relating to me. If I had asked everybody at the meditations to become my informants, I may have encountered a much larger variation in

attitude, and I might have experienced people bailing out. The people who became my informants were people that I liked, who signaled what I interpreted as a minimum of liking back. These are mechanism that will always be present when conducting fieldwork. A person who will not talk to you will simply not talk to you. The people I spoke to also happened to be people with a certain interest in communicating and relating socially in general. At summer-courses that I attended, there would be certain huts for people who wanted a silent retreat – no speaking. There were also specific tables for people who wanted silence. I didn't verbally approach people staying in the silent huts and sitting at the silent table. The people who chose silence might have had different stories to tell. The mere fact that I needed to *speak* to people to generate data-material, did in itself represent selection.

When I came to KTL the first time, as described in chapter one, I had not been very interested in talking to people or relating socially, and I certainly would not have talked to anybody doing research. I assume that I am not that unique, but that other people can prefer to be left alone as well. When starting the period of time defined as fieldwork, I had decided to make participation an end in itself. Yet, I was present in a way that differed from what I would have been, if I had not been doing fieldwork. Doing fieldwork I was more outgoing. Not because I was obliged to (in the sense of doing it against my will): I really wanted to, and I really enjoyed it. But my ultimate aim of doing research made me contact people, reach out in ways I would not have done, if research had not made it legitimate and necessary. My awareness of engaging in research did something to how I related to people and performed in social situations.

This chapter will address more of the complexities pertaining to delimitation, by drawing upon some of my fieldwork experience. What I want to demonstrate in this chapter is that when I talk about constructing the field or delimitation, it is not synonymous with me making all the choices. I relate to people who also relate to me. I navigate a reality that also influences my movements. This is also what makes the generation of new knowledge possible. What is more: the stories I am about to tell in the following paragraphs, are also stories about how conversation and participation generate different kinds of knowledge, which had implication for the choices I made as well as for the understandings that I could develop.



## 4.3 *A choice in the making*

### 4.3.1 A conversation

One of the first phone calls I made before going to Oslo was to the Rinzai Zen center. The Rinzai Zen center was also one of the first groups I visited when starting fieldwork, right after having spent time at KTL. At their internet site one can read that the teachings and practices of this group follow what is called the Japanese Rinzai tradition. The Zen-tradition is explained as being about the “direct experience of truth and reality through sitting meditation”, and as emphasizing interconnection: “When the wisdom of this ripens, we acknowledge that any form, even a stone or a bird, is part of the self”<sup>15</sup>. At the time I was doing fieldwork the group had an Austrian Zen teacher, Genro Seiun Koudela. He had been their teacher from 1991, and would visit the group from time to time. He lived in Austria as Abbot of Bodhidharma Zendo, Vienna. “Googeling” provides 64 hits on his name<sup>16</sup>, far too much to elaborate upon here as such. What strikes me is the international character of his Zen education as well as his practice as a teacher: He was born in Vienna in 1924, and he has spent 25 years in the USA; Pennsylvania as well as California and New Mexico, presently teaching in Austria<sup>17</sup>.

The daily leader of the Rinzai Zen center lives in Oslo. He is not a teacher himself, but he was listed as their contact person when I began fieldwork. Their homepage on the internet<sup>18</sup> informs us that he has studied with Joshu Sasaki Roshi and Genro Seiun Osho since 1986. Their biographies underline international rooting<sup>19</sup>, an observation that would turn out to hold true for the other Buddhist groups as well. I am told that when the daily leader began his Zen practice in 1964, it was with Shunryu Suzuki Roshi in San Francisco, a Japanese Zen priest belonging to the Soto lineage, born in Japan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am told that five years

<sup>15</sup> Rinzai Zen Center homepage, <http://www.rinzai-Zen.no>, last accessed 2007-10-27. Translated from Norwegian to English by me.

<sup>16</sup> Last search performed 2007-10-27.

<sup>17</sup> Information on this can be found at several different internet sites, for instance <http://www.mbzc.org/centers.php4> and [http://www2.hmc.edu/www\\_common/religious\\_studies/baldy/history.html](http://www2.hmc.edu/www_common/religious_studies/baldy/history.html), last accessed 2007-10-30.

<sup>18</sup> Rinzai Zen Center homepage, <http://www.rinzai-zen.no/>, last accessed 2007-10-20.

<sup>19</sup>s Googeling provides 570 hits on Joshu Sasaki Roshi (Last search performed 2007-10-27). He is presented as the founder and Abbot of Rinzaï-ji in the USA, born in Japan in 1907. He entered Zen training at Zuiryo-ji in Japan at fourteen, but went to the USA in 1962, establishing the first Zendo of Rinzaï-ji. The Mt. Baldy Zen center was opened as a monistic style training facility in California in the early seventies. Joshu Sasaki Roshi is presented as engaging in extensive traveling in the USA and abroad (Mt. Baldy Zen homepage, <http://www.mbzc.org/teacher.php4>, last accessed 2007-11-17).

after Shunryu Suzuki Roshi came to San Francisco, where a center was established, the daily leader began his Zen practice with Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. It was no surprise to me that when I called the daily leader he answered in Norwegian with a slight American accent.

I took notes when talking to him on the phone, and when talking to him in person I used a tape recorder, transcribing our conversation word by word afterwards. He told me that the Rinzaï Zen was a small, active group having their main meditations twice a week: Thursday afternoon and Sunday morning. Some people came on a regular basis; others were just “*passing by*”, he said. This sounded like the same phenomenon that I had noticed at the Monday meditations, what I have formerly referred to as a porosity that made it difficult to delimit the gathering of people as a group. I asked him if he had any idea why this was so. In his experience, he said, the most eager visitors dropped out first. The more skeptical ones tended to stay. In his opinion the drop-outs tended to be people with too many preconceptions, too many ideas about what Zen and meditational practice was. When things turned out to be different from their ideas, they left.

*“People, who are shopping, keep shopping. But if you end up in a group and belong to that group, and feel that this is something, you stay. Shopping is being constantly on the lookout for something else: “This is it!” And then some time passes, and you find out that, no, this was not it after all... Most people are seeking. The problem is that they are seeking something outside of themselves. That is the problem”.*

What he perceives to be “*shoppers*” are seen as engaging in an enterprise that is contrasted to serious engagement in Buddhist practice.

The group was characterized by diversity regarding education as well as age, but there were a lot more men than women, he told me. This surprised me. At the Monday meditations the genders seemed to be equally represented among the participants. He told me he had no idea why there were so many men, but that it had always been like that. This was not just a characteristic of the Norwegian group, but the same pattern was to be found in Austria, mainly men, only ¼ women, he said. Another characteristic of this group was that they all wore black at the meditational gatherings. There had been no dress-code at KTL, so I was curious as to why. He answered:

*“In Japan they wear black. Red and yellow in Tibet, there are different traditions in different countries. Anyway, in a tradition it is about being part of the group. We put away any distinguishing features. Normally we dress to stand out, to*

*be special. But it is precisely this “special” that we put away. And when doing walking meditation, we move as one body”*

I wondered if there were any differences when it came to the philosophy and/or meditational practice when comparing the Rinzai Zen to the other groups. He told me that this tradition emphasized meditation and contemplation. Meditational practice was about “*focusing on the breath, letting thoughts settle*”. In contrast to Tibetan Buddhism, Rinzai Zen does not practice visualizations. The closest thing to visualization had to be koan practice, he said:

*“Koans are stories, conversations or encounters between teacher and student. And the student gets an aha-experience through this. Koans are classical stories that illustrate the path. It is used a lot as an object for dialogue, between teacher and student”.*

He pointed out that he did not know a lot about the differences between the groups, but he knew that the style of Rinzai Zen was a lot stricter:

*“At KTL it is OK to move and to stand up during meditations, here it is not. We sit totally still for 25 minutes at a time”.*

Having said this, he quickly emphasized that the differences were “*merely cosmetic*”. An emphasis on similarities, not differences, becomes the concluding remark. The emphasis on similarities would turn out to be a common denominator in the narratives of all my informants.

I found many similarities between what the daily leader told me, and what I had been taught at the Monday meditations when I asked about Buddhism. When asking what he considered the core in Buddhism, his answer went as follows:

*“The core would be the four noble truths. That is the basis. The most central one of them is impermanence. What do I experience as me? You look for something that is constant, something that lasts forever. But everything is constantly changing, so where do you find your “self” then? I wear a mask depending on circumstances; we are different personalities in different contexts; “today I am not quite myself...” So, we are constantly changing. All the time. A very simple principle”.*

This could have been said by any of the teachers at any of the groups. I felt I was on familiar ground, compared to my experience from the KTL Monday meditations. This was also the case when I questioned him whether he considered Buddhism to be a philosophy or religion, or maybe something totally different. He answered that that would depend on the definition of religion:

*“We don’t have the concept of God. The concept of Buddha nature moves in the direction of a “divine principle”, but everything has Buddha nature. There is no dualism. Religion answers to the longing human beings have to go beyond dualism, to achieve “one-ness”; uni-vers. One, just one. Experiencing one-ness is religion”*

The oneness he points out would also turn out to be a common denominator in the stories of all my informants.

“What about Buddhism as therapy?” I asked, having read so much about Buddhism as therapy, and being interested in the aspects of transformation.

*“Well. It is best in this kind of practice that you are relatively balanced. If you are not mentally stable you have to work with that first and foremost, before starting this practice. You are confronted with yourself. And, if you are mentally unstable, you need someone to support you. Get out of the situation. Zen practice is not therapy. It can of course function therapeutically, but you have to be fairly balanced to enjoy this practice”.*

I asked if this meant that the group didn’t function as a church or a congregation, open to everybody. He explained:

*“To really engage in this practice you have to be balanced, I believe. We have had people here that have been unstable to differing degrees. They have just disappeared by themselves. They don’t find what they are looking for here. It seems like a natural process. Finding out if you are fit for this practice or not. Our practice is so strict, that if you are not properly motivated, it does not work. I have heard about masters working in jails, and, there are rumors among people in prison: They are so strict! (he laughs) That says quite a bit...”*

The strictness he pointed out, the wearing of black clothes and the predominance of male participants were new elements to me. But apart from these aspects, my impression was one of encountering something familiar. The sense of familiarity was enhanced when he told me about the history of this group. A group of Norwegians had come together to study and explore Zen. This happened at the same time as KTLBS had been founded, in the early seventies. Both groups had started with a group of young Norwegians meeting on a regular basis. Both started out without any direct connection to any tradition, and both established such connections after a while:

*“This group started without any contact with any specific tradition. Then they heard about a Zen master in Austria, and some went there. Then we started to move*

*in two different directions. Some wanted to get connected to a specific teaching tradition, others wanted to make a Norwegian version. Buddhism adapts to the culture it enters. But these are processes that take years. To adapt things you have to know what you are doing, what to change and how”*

In the late eighties they became connected to the Zen master, Genro Seiun Koudela. In 1993 this Zen master became their formal teacher. The group was slowly growing, and had a core of very serious practitioners, he told me, adding that *“people feel safe and want to continue”*. He also said that there had been periods with what he refers to as argumentation and gossip, which in his opinion tended to scare people away. I asked what the arguments had been about. He told me that the bone of contention was the existence of two different tendencies: one, having a connection with a certain tradition and a teacher, two, adapting to Norwegian conditions. These tendencies were something I would later on discern myself from the data-material I produced, as a basic issue that every group somehow related to. The Rinzai Zen group in its present form emphasized the connection with a certain tradition and teacher. But some people could react negatively to what they conceived of as alien import, conceiving of it as merely copying Japanese style, he said. He, however, does not conceive of it as being so. On the contrary:

*“Things can be changed. However, to do this, one has to understand what it is all about. Changing things you don’t understand the full meaning of would be wrong”*.

The gathering was open to everybody, but I asked permission to attend since I was doing research, even though my intention was merely one of participating. I had found the conversation with him both interesting and enjoyable, and I was looking forward to going. I had been told that this was a very strict kind of meditational practice, entailing sitting still for 25 minutes not moving at all, before doing walking-meditation, and then sitting still again. I had also been told that everybody had to wear black clothes, due to an emphasis on putting aside everything that make individuals differ from each other. All this was new to me, and yes, it sounded a lot stricter than the meditational practice at KTL. But nothing I could not handle. I thought myself relatively well prepared, but I was in for surprise.

#### **4.3.2 Veni, Vidi, Fugi**

“I came, I saw, I fled... Aching. Getting angrier and angrier. Constructing words of such bad nature that I could have written my own dictionary. It would all be over in a couple of

hours. But the realization that I could not stay here for another minute eventually took total control over me. And yet, it took me an hour or so to build up the bravery of despair needed to leave. But when I did, I ran head over heels... How professional can one be?"

I wrote this in my fieldwork notes after my first visit to a meditational gathering at the Rinzai Zen Center. What caused my fury? First I had been sitting for 25 minutes on a black pillow. Not moving at all. Then I had been walking in a line of people slowly around the room, then sitting still for another 25 minutes. I am quite used to sitting cross-legged, my standard working position, so this did not bother me. And I was familiar with meditation from the Monday meditations. But what went on here was a different kind of meditational practice. Here I was required to keep my hands at about belly-button level. This created a tension because it did not allow my muscles to relax the way they can when the arms are placed on my knees or in my lap; the positions I was accustomed to. Due to inflamed joints and tendons such a static position was a painful exercise to me. The sensation blended with the knowledge that sitting like this too long would trigger inflammations to keep me awake for nights to come. As I said in the first sentence, I fled. But it took me an hour or so to be able to do that. Why did it take me so long? I was free to go, nobody made me stay! But something strange happened:

When arriving at the premises I waited in the big room outside the meditation room together with a small group of people, mainly men. They all seemed friendly. One of them told me that this was a place where they did some serious sitting, you did not move even if your snot was running down... Once he had a bad cold, and he had been told to take his hands down when trying to wipe his nose, he said with a laugh. The others agreed, nodding.

When entering the meditation-room I found it aesthetic in its simplicity: big, airy, light and clean, with wooden floor and a simple Buddha statue and flowers in the front. No furniture. The meditators, myself included, were supposed to sit in a perfect square, facing the middle of the room: I could tell from the way black little mats and black round pillows were laid out, and from the way people entering the room settled down after a quick bow towards the Buddha statue. The symmetry and the consequential use of colors, or rather lack thereof, transmitted a sense of discipline that would have been detectable even in a photograph. Experiencing the scenario that unfolded over time made discipline an even more central feature, as the sitting positions were indeed rigidly upheld over a long period of time: 25 minutes. The time spent sitting was not the problem, it was the sitting position that made it

difficult for me. The sitting position in itself was more rigid (hands at belly-button level, not resting in the lap), so the exercise was a lot more taxing than I had expected. The walking-meditation was characterized by the same discipline, everybody circling the room slowly, in step, and at the same speed, as one single organism, obeying the sound of wooden sticks being clicked together, then 25 minutes of sitting again, then walking-meditation, and so on.

I had been asked to leave my purse behind when entering the meditational room. Now, I was not afraid of being robbed. But I carry important life-sustaining medication in my purse, and I always keep it close to me when away from home. Having to leave my purse is in itself quite stressful. I silently hoped I would have no need for any medication. But knowing that the medication would not be there if I should happen to need it, made me focused in a way that I try to avoid, on medication and the contingency of needing it. I prefer being able to focus on other aspects of life. Now I became quite frustrated, in fact to such an extent that I was no longer thinking of myself as conducting fieldwork; I was possessed by the idea that being here was a huge mistake, and that my major task was one of getting out of here.

I am certain I could have told the daily leader why I would much prefer to have my purse with me, and I believe I would have been allowed to bring it along. However, this would imply telling something private about myself: something I felt was “nobody else’s business”. And I assumed that I would not only have had to tell it once to one person, but again and again, to every single person who thought I was making a beginner’s mistake, and wished to introduce me to the correct procedures. I did not want to attract attention to my own person like this, and I did not want to constitute the eye-catching irregularity I would have been, sitting with a purse behind me, and arms conspicuously in my lap. I already felt a bit out of place wearing make-up, though ever so discreet, due to the occasion. With my shock of red hair, and increasingly red face, I already felt like a blot of red ink that someone had spilled on an otherwise clean sheet.

Inside the meditation room, when sitting down, the daily leader checked out my sitting position. It turned out to be OK. I had never experienced being checked out like that at KTL. Then somebody else asked me to move, because the pillow I had sat down on was reserved for the people who make tea. The pillow I was sitting on was next to the door, and I moved to a pillow further away. This was also new to me. Being corrected twice in less than a minute made me feel exposed in a way I never had at KTL, where I could hide in the back whenever I wanted to, and be allowed to do so, unnoticed. The feeling of exposure was underlined by the

way we were sitting: in straight lines in a square, facing the teacher, visible to him as well as to everybody else. The analogue of Foucault's Panopticon comes to mind: the diagram of a normalizing political technology, based on perpetual surveillance. At KTL we had been sitting helter-skelter, and I could hide behind and between people if I wanted to. Hiding was not an option here.

When the meditation started, there was a short citation and chanting in Japanese. The others reached out for a text written on a pamphlet hidden underneath the pillows, and the papers were obviously to be held in a certain manner – as if praying. A woman led the chanting. She sung in a manner I found strange. First I thought something got stuck in her throat. But noticing the repetition of patterns made me understand that this is how it was supposed to be done. First, when I sat down, I tried to sneak my arms the way I had been taught to hold them when meditating at KTL, on my knees. But the Austrian teacher who was visiting at the time, said “*put your left hand in your right*”. I felt it was impossible to object to his instructions. Breaking the silence and the order, and drawing focus upon myself by talking and explaining why I would not do as instructed seemed totally inappropriate. I did as he said, but inside I was cursing. While sitting there I could hear him approach. I wondered what I was doing wrong now... It turned out that even when though my arms were held at belly-button level, they were still not in the right position. Firmly, he shaped them the right way: the thumbs were supposed to point up, and the rest of each hand flat beneath. He then went on to correcting the head of the person sitting beside me, and I could hear him moving along the line of people, but I did not know what was going on as I did not dare to turn my head. But soft whisperings could be heard, indicating subtle corrections being made.

The time was come for walking meditation. Again, I thought myself prepared. But again, it turned out to be a different kind than I was used to. At the walking-meditations I had done before, everybody had been walking in their own tempo. Here the leader of the meditation used wooden sticks that were clapped together, marking when it was time to get up, and what tempo we were supposed to walk in. Luckily, I had already developed techniques for walking slowly without losing my balance. The way I go about doing it is as follows: if you picture an invisible rope, I imagine myself not stepping on it, but carefully stepping to the left and to the right side of this invisible rope. This creates a slightly straddling motion. I also make certain that when moving one foot in front of the other, the period of time when only one foot is touching the ground is reduced to a minimum. The time spent rolling from heel to toe decides



the tempo of this walking. If I had walked slowly by moving my feet slowly while in the air, I might have fallen.

The sound of wood clapping together was a contrast to the soft, chiming bowls I was used to from KTL. The wood created a clapping, firm sound that again, to me, emphasized the discipline. I had a sense of everything being noticed by the teacher. And what is more, I felt that I was prevented from having any overview myself, because I felt compelled not to move my head. To notice what the leader of the meditation was doing, I would have had to do exactly that: move my head. Not being able to look around made the experience of being watched even more pronounced, because I had no way of knowing when I was being watched. I had never spent my time looking around while meditating at KTL, either. Still, if a stiff neck bothered you too much and you felt like stretching a bit, or you had to wipe your nose, this was an option that was actually being used. At KTL the helter-skelter we were sitting in even allowed you to hide behind the person in front of you if you wanted to. This is how my sense of being able to preserve my anonymity was created when first coming to KTL. I had been able to come and leave and mind my own business without being disturbed. I had been taught how to sit properly before, but this had happened through verbal instructions given to the whole group, and through watching the teacher. I had never experienced anybody correcting my posture individually, neither physically nor verbally. Actually, I had never experienced being corrected, even though I had been told there were certain rules. For instance, one of the teachers at the Tibetan Buddhist group told me in an interview that one is not supposed to put Buddhist texts directly on the floor. This has to do with showing respect towards the teachings. One should always have something underneath the texts. But if people did put the texts on the floor, they were not corrected. This was their choice, he emphasized of his own accord. At the Rinzai Zen center, however, not even the slightest detail was a matter of privacy.

After the second round of sitting still for 25 minutes there was a second round of walking-meditation. This time I had my plan ready: when passing the doorway I would elope. I slipped out very quickly and quietly, grabbed my purse outside and left. I knew I could not do fieldwork here. My body was simply not cut out for it, and if I should adjust my practice to my bodily limitations, it would mean assuming behavior that did not fit with the order that ruled here. Being a deviant did not appeal to me. The weeks to come I kept debating with myself. I knew this group could constitute an interesting contrast in a comparative enterprise. I understood that the strict discipline at the Rinzai Zen centre was there for a reason, and

talking to the participants could shed light upon the practice as well as the ideas behind it. My conclusion, however, was that even though it constituted an interesting phenomenon, I would not be able to generate data-material when being so caught up in my own frustrations. Because of this decision, I did not attend the meditations at this group. Which again meant that I did not establish the relationships needed to conduct personal interviews at this group. The experience was in no way wasted, however. Not only did it help me in the difficult process of delimitation. But it also made me conscious of a few phenomena I might otherwise not have noticed:

### 4.3.3 Some implications

Later on I would contemplate the following paradox: Here I was in the middle of something that erased my individuality on so many levels (I was dressed in black like the others; I sat like the others, and walked like the others). But the experience of me as a separate entity became most acute: My aching arm and the feeling that I could not leave. The “NO!” that rushed through my body made me physically stiff. I felt I was within an armor of muscle, very much opposed to something else outside. A clear division was felt between *me* on the one hand, and a *something* that compelled me to do things I did not want to, on the other. A ‘no’ implies the existence of different forces, pulling in different directions. Otherwise the ‘no’ would not make sense. But what I experienced as the force opposed to me was not any of the people present. What I experienced as ‘other’ had a different character, it was inside of me, and yet not experienced as part of me. Even though generated in my mind, I sensed the force as an invisible, yet almost tactile, pressure from without. I am not introducing this reaction as a general reaction among my fellow meditators. I have no way of knowing what went on behind their half-closed eyes. I am merely telling about my own experience of pressure, triggered by a certain context, of which I was very much part.

And yet, my response was a response towards something, revealing one aspect (of many) of some phenomenon I was facing. Whether my reaction was negative or positive is of no relevance as such. But it constituted a point of departure for reflection: I pondered for weeks what had happened. I knew that it had nothing to do with any formal rules at this specific place. It seemed like the setting itself, the context as a whole, conjured up a sense of order that made me feel it would be a violation to leave. Something about the situation was orchestrated in such a manner that a sense of pressure was conjured up.

When writing down the whole episode at home after my hectic departure, I realized something. First I wrote that at the other groups I could sit wherever I wanted to, and added, “of course, not where the teacher is supposed to sit. And of course, not with our backs to the front”. Then I looked closer at what I had just written. I realized that I had just stated that I could not sit wherever I wanted in the other groups either. Some of the space was reserved for the teacher – in front. Weeks later I found out that at another Buddhist group (the Dharma Group) we were actually supposed to face the wall when doing sitting-meditation. Not even the obviousness of facing the front turned out to be obvious. There were unwritten rules at the other groups as well. My immediate experience, however, had been that Rinzai Zen operated with more restriction, an observation supported by the people attending meditations there. But part of my experience was also due to lack of knowledge on my part:

From years of school I had been taught the rules about teacher in front. Being familiar with these proceedings made it appear obvious to me where in the room I should be in other contexts as well, obvious in a way that created the illusion of being able to sit wherever I wanted to. What appeared to me as my choice, was rather faithfully obeying socially transmitted rules. Lack of knowledge had made me sit down at the wrong place at the Rinzai Zen Center. I simply did not know enough about the proceedings. If I had known that there would be a tea-ceremony and that someone would have to slip out silently to prepare tea, this would have made it obvious that the tea-makers would have to sit closest to the door. Instead I had to be asked to move. What was special about this place was that I had been made conscious of restrictions. In general, I cannot place my body wherever I want to, not all space is available to me. *Not even when I think I am freely choosing where to put my body.* But learned patterns of behavior can make such restrictions invisible. Where I put my body can appear to me as a result of free choice, my will. Realizing that this choice of mine is actually a result of former learning, made the concept of ‘my will’ crumble. Along with that, a number of questions arose.

Common to the questions I asked myself in the wake of my sit-and-run episode was the following fact: they all related to a thematization of ‘me’ and ‘other’. The ‘no’-experience was one of banging into something ‘not me’, and thus ‘other’. The experience of a something forcing me to sit was yet another sensation of ‘other’. I was forced to ponder what constituted ‘me’ and ‘other’, as this ‘other’ was nowhere to be spotted, apart from inside of – me. Indeed, the whole experience challenged the very distinction between ‘me’ and ‘other’.

## 4.4 *Another choice in the making*

### 4.4.1 Some facts

The Norwegian teacher of the Dharma group, Svein Myreng, was appointed “Dharmacharya”, which means teacher, by Thich Nhat Hanh in 1994. Right before starting my fieldwork, I learnt that Svein Myreng was a distant cousin of mine. When I first contacted Svein Myreng, it was as a fieldworker and a relative. When attending Svein Myreng’s funeral in April 2007, it was as a mourner. When reading the transcripts of the conversations I had with him, his wife and their little son, it brings tears to my eyes.

I could relate to Svein Myreng’s story about how he became interested in Buddhism. He had a history of heart problems as well as other serious health issues, which forced him to relate to the issue of death from a very tender age. Not as a theoretical issue, but as a result of his experience of the fragility of life. At the age of seventeen he was the closest he had ever come to dying, he told me. It was a tough time, colored by the fear of death, and he started reading a lot:

*“I was quite attracted to Eastern philosophy, I had read about Taoism, and it appealed to me. Religions, however, seemed like belief systems to me. And the problem is that intellectually you can justify anything. That was not enough for me. I was dealing with matters of life and death, and games of word and logic were not good enough. Then I found an introduction to Zen Buddhism. Zen is a tradition beyond scriptures. It hit me really hard. Shortly thereafter I found a little note about an introductory course in Buddhism on a Thursday, no date or anything, but it turned out to be the right Thursday. That is how I started at the Zen school.”*

People from the other groups that I talked to during fieldwork characterized the Dharma Group people as very nice and sweet people. “*You can tell who they are, just by looking at them, they seem so nice!*” one of my informants from KTLBS said. Svein Myreng’s wife is one of the people who emphasize “*the mildness*” of this group. She actually met Svein Myreng for the first time coming to the Dharma Group. She had chosen to come to the Dharma Group after careful consideration, because she wanted to go to a place

*“where you are not hit on the shoulder. I had heard that some places that happens. At that time, such discipline was the last thing I needed... [ ] I called Svein Myreng, and he said something like “we are very nice and mild...””*

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Just like KTLBS, the Dharma Group has local groups other places in Norway as well, and just like KTLBS the main center is to be found in Oslo. But the size is very different. Another feature differs as well: on their old homepage at the internet one could read that their aim was a Norwegian Buddhism, free from exotic rituals, based on the understanding that Buddhism has a universal core:

“If the practice of meditation is to bear fruit, it has to be integrated into everyday life. We can try to live unpretentiously, with more compassion for ourselves and others. Thus we can create alternatives to the stress, greed and loneliness of the consumer society. We aim at creating an open and inclusive community, where everybody is welcome, regardless of social status, age, philosophy of life, gender, sexual preferences etc. We aim at creating a Norwegian Buddhism, free from exotic rituals. The core in the teachings of the Buddha is universal, and everybody can enjoy down to earth meditation and practicing awareness. We do not worship by any particular dogmas or creeds, but we want to approach life openheartedly and in wonder. If meditational practice is to bear fruit, it has to be interconnected with everyday life”.<sup>20</sup>

I note the emphasis on creating an *open community*, welcoming *everybody*. The mention of the consumer society is not just a point made on their website. An explicit concern about the society in which we live was very characteristic among the members of this group. The group was not just intended to be a meditational forum cultivating practice for the few. They had a pronounced ambition of creating a community with room for everybody, a community that was intended to present a real alternative to what was understood as mainstream society and its consumerism.

On several occasions I heard Svein Myreng talk about the shopping mentality in our society as a poor substitute for real, good, human social relations. The goal had to be, I was told, to create a good social environment, to create an alternative to the emptiness that shopping mentality, consumerism and the like feeds upon. At the Dharma Group I witnessed how September 11, which took place while I was doing fieldwork, inspired debates in the group. Questions discussed by the participants were about the political responsibilities of a Buddhist practitioner, a need for doing something was expressed. In general, among members at the Dharma Group I found an emphasis on ethical shopping and living, and at the “*Alternativ-*

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<sup>20</sup> The Dharma Group homepage, updated by Eevi Beck 2007-02-20 , <http://www.buddhistforbundet.no/dharma/dharmagr.no> , last accessed 2007-10-30, translated from Norwegian to English by me.

*messen*” at Oslo Spectrum, a so-called New Age-fair which is arranged every year, one of their members was at a stand representing ethical banking.

The environmental and social awareness of the Dharma Group continues the awareness of their main teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who engaged politically during the war in Vietnam<sup>21</sup>. In fact, his efforts to generate peace moved Martin Luther King, Jr. to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. Today Thich Nhat Hanh lives in Plum Village, a small community in France, teaching, writing and continuing to help refugees worldwide.

#### **4.4.2 Perceiving relevance and the body as map**

I talked to Svein Myreng at the apartment where he lived with wife and son. They were all present when I was visiting. Because of this, I have some trouble hearing what is being said when transcribing the interview later on. Small kids are not quiet, and even though their little two year old son is merely happy and not noisy at all, baby-sounds in the background make recordings pretty blurred. The first minutes are practically incomprehensible. This improves, though, as his wife advised me to put a newspaper under my tape recorder, to reduce the noise from the table. She has a Ph.D., and has conducted quite a number of interviews herself. Putting a newspaper underneath did improve the quality of the sound, but not enough to compensate for the sounds in the background. Their apartment had a clean, pure atmosphere that resembled the place that the group used for meditation. There were no excessive decorations or expensive furniture, and no television. In the living room there was a drying stand with a lot of clean diapers and baby clothes hanging. They were not using paper diapers, but being ecologically conscious. Svein Myreng folded diapers while talking with me.

After having visited Svein Myreng and Eevi Beck the first time, I thought about the nice simplicity of their home. And it struck me that they had no mirrors, not even in the bathroom. I thought about how unusual that was. Then some time later I visited them again, and I realized that there was a mirror above the sink in the bathroom. But I had not seen it. Not because it was small or hidden – you had to see it when washing your hands. But something about being here made me less conscious about myself, in a way that made my reflection, my appearance, become irrelevant. Normally I can't help casting a glance in the mirror when

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<sup>21</sup> The information I provide here is taken from "Plum Village Summer Opening" by Anne Cushman, <http://seaox.com/thich.html>, last accessed 2007-10-30

washing my hands in the bathroom. I must have done so here as well, but my focus had been elsewhere. My physical eyes must have looked at the mirror, but I was not really looking in that direction.

The episode with the mirror is a story that comprises a more general effect that being in this group had on me. I became aware of how much I am steered by what I will call a third eye, in the sense that I am watching myself from the outside. For instance: instead of being relaxed and aware of the sensation of having a stomach, the way my stomach appears is more important. I keep holding it in. I observe my stomach from the outside, rather than resting peacefully in the sensation of having a stomach. These are two very different modes of relating to my body, which the meditational practice at the Dharma group brought strongly to my attention. I experienced some implications of these modes of being present, as differences that made a difference to me. The awareness that was cultivated by the meditational practice, made me able to perceive signals from my body that I had not been aware of before, or maybe they weren't even produced in the first place. I became aware of how different people and situations affected me, by way of the sensations they provoked: muscles tightening, discomfort and fatigue, or sensations of energy and desire to live. If I am fatigued, the effects are not limited to the situations producing fatigue: it has an influence on every aspect of my life. By being enabled to draw upon the knowledge my body seemed to have, I was provided with information I could use to make decisions regarding what situations and people I should spend time with. It was as if my body was transformed into a map I could use for navigating my life.

#### **4.4.3 Tools for navigation**

At the Dharma group the meditations would begin by spreading woolen blankets in a square on the floor, together with meditational pillows. One for each of us. Whoever arrived first would start arranging pillows and blankets. When everybody had come, we started doing relaxing exercises, lying down with our feet towards the walls. The leader of the meditation would give us instructions. It could be visualizations: Imagine you are a stone falling into a river. You are falling, falling, falling. Into the sand at the bottom. The sand covers you. You lie there, and sense the water rushing above you. Or we would be instructed to focus upon our bodies, beginning with the toes, working our way up to the head. And we would be given instructions to smile to every part of the body. I found these exercises extremely relaxing. So did the others, I would be told through interviews as well as informal conversation. An

indicator of some serious relaxation going on was the snoring that always would arise from at least one of the participants as the exercise progressed. Even myself at times. After the relaxation, we would go directly into sitting meditation. At the Dharma Group we were sitting with our faces towards the wall, in a square, with the teacher at one end. When beginning the sitting meditation we were instructed in visualizations, for instance to visualize ourselves as a mountain, firmly placed and rooted. After the instructions we would go into quiet sitting meditation, just breathing. Then there would be walking meditation. In contrast to the Rinzai Zen Center, where we had to walk simultaneously and move like one organism, we were walking in our own tempo. In fact, the teacher emphasized the importance of adjusting our walking to our own breath. Being in touch with and aware of your own body was emphasized as important. After the meditations we would drink tea and engage in conversation.

The conversation consisted of questions and comments on meditation and Buddhism – as well as issues like 9/11. But the way it was done was special. When a person wanted to say something, s/he would bow, and so would the others. That person would then have the time that followed to talk, uninterrupted. Nobody else could talk until s/he bowed, and thus signaled that s/he was finished. When people ordinarily converse, I find it a lot more hectic. Taking time to think or even breathe means that others might take over talking, often I don't get the opportunity to finish my reflections. People tend to talk simultaneously, and the loudest person usually wins. In many situations I observe that people almost has to fight to get the opportunity to talk, and to be able to finish what they have started out saying. Here you had no need for doing so. You could take your time to breathe, think, associate, and not be interrupted. This mode of conversing opened up for a kind of contemplation that I miss in a lot of other social contexts in general. I found I was given the space needed to contemplate what I was saying. This meant that when other people spoke, I could really listen, focus upon what was being said. I did not have to plan what I wanted to say while others were speaking, nor did I have to engage in the kind of listening where I scan for space to jump in with my own comments, which is a kind of listening that does not really allow me to pay attention to what another person says. The practices at the Dharma group thematized the relationship 'me-other' in many different ways<sup>22</sup>:

At one time we had a teacher visiting from abroad, and a special exercise was used. We were instructed to just walk around slowly, quietly and breathing in the room, not in a circle, but in

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<sup>22</sup> Not as opposed to any other group, it just so happened that I had chosen to follow the meditations at the Dharma group.



any way you wanted to. After having done so, we were instructed to meet the eyes of people as you were passing them. I never knew eying people could produce such effect. I felt an electrical rush whenever my eyes met another person's eyes. Not a word was spoken. As I became aware of the eyes of another person on me, I became intensely aware of the existence of another consciousness as an almost horrifying realization. For a moment I would forget any signals from my own body, just being pulled into the gaze of another being. This practice, as well as the other practices that we engaged in at the Dharma group, were different kind of exercises in awareness. Awareness of one's own body, awareness of the existence of others, awareness of how I relate to myself and others – and awareness of

The practices not only brought about awareness of my own body, but of me-in-relation-to-others. What I experienced at the Dharma group differed very much from my experience at the Rinzai Zen center. But a common denominator could be found in this: I was brought to experience and question distinctions and relations between me and others, inside and outside, making reality take on a different appearance.

I was also provided with conceptual tools that I have used a lot ever since. For instance, I learnt the concept of “suchness” at the Dharma group. Everything we encounter is presented as having its own suchness. I was told that this suchness is neither good nor bad, the question is, how do we relate to it? For instance, a fireplace burning is very hot, and if you stick your hand in it, you get burnt. But you don't throw out the fireplace because you cannot stick your hand in it. At the right distance it provides pleasant and most useful heat. The heat is not good or bad, it is a question of relating to its suchness. I found the metaphor useful when relating to people in general. If a person cannot keep secrets, I just don't tell the person secrets. The person can be fun to be with, as long as I relate to the person's suchness. No single person can provide me with everything, but most people can provide me with something positive. It is just a question of relating to these aspects, not the ones that may burn me. I can cry with one person, laugh with another. So I do that, instead of trying to force one single person to become someone I can both cry and laugh with.

These pragmatic adaptations of mine must not be confused with any presentation of Buddhism. The experiences I am telling about, is merely part of the complexities that made me choose the Dharma group as a strategic point of intervention. When choosing the Dharma group, the sense of being provided with something I could make use of beyond research played a part in the decision: I was given an embodied map and language for what Hirsch

terms “finding my feet in the world” (2003:16). Reality was opened up as a different realm of enquiry, as I learnt new ways of being present in my body.

Telling about my experiences at the Rinzai Zen center and at the Dharma-group is more than merely telling about processes of choosing. It sets the stage for much of what is to come in this text. Both encounters brought about a thematization of what constituted ‘me’, not by intellectual means, but by way of bodily experience. My very foundations were shaken, as I experienced distinctions between me and others, inside and outside being challenged in a real, lived way. Though different in many ways, both encounters had something in common: they provided bodily experience that threw me headlong into realms of acute indeterminacy, forcing basic questions regarding my existence. I would later learn that the practice at all the groups forced me into the midst of such indeterminacies. And later yet, I would see how my fellow meditators indeed thematized such indeterminacies in their stories about seeking.

## 5. History and histories

### 5.1 *Introduction*

The meditational gatherings where I had the experiences presented in chapters above, where I also would meet my informants, existed because of a development that has been going on for years, and still is. What is more: this is a development of which my informants were very much part, regardless of their degree of involvement, regardless of whether they had a central position in the Buddhist groups or merely visited as a once in a lifetime occurrence. In this chapter I will present some aspect of these dynamics, introducing the dimension of time, drawing attention to how we are dealing with ongoing processes, and how people's individual quests of seeking could make very particular social landscapes manifest.

Looking into the social landscape that manifests today one catches a glimpse of processes that cannot be delimited in neither space nor time. The Buddhist groups which I encountered when doing fieldwork, have a history comprised by the innumerable individual histories of different people whose paths have crossed and intermingled. It has become a tiny part of my history as well, a fragment of the story of my life. Some people have seemingly come to stay, like the woman who opened the door when I first came to KTL, and Lama Changchub, the Tibetan Lama living in the Gumpa. Some people merely visit, some once in a lifetime, some more or less regularly, some have been, some are becoming, and some still are engaging in the Buddhist organizations in different ways, and at different levels. A constant osmosis seems to be going on; constituting the loose boundaries I observed quite early, the porosity that made it difficult to talk about clearly defined groups.

Beckford (1985) uses a model of concentric circles to illustrate these dynamics. In the middle of these circles he places those who are heavily involved. Further out he places participants at courses, workshops and summer courses, and those who read books on the issues in question, and says that there are a lot more people to be found in the outer circles than within the inner circles. "At this level we are not talking about membership or social organizations, but rather a certain (religious) mentality that cannot be delimited to any specific social environment. The direction of influence goes in all directions, working its ways from the center to a much

wider popular culture, as well as the other way around” (Sky 2007:63-64). My observations during the time defined as fieldwork, in the sense of listening to people’s stories as well as participating, lent support to Beckford’s model. I also learnt that some people who come by might eventually settle as belonging to certain groups and become more stable elements, whereas other people may detach themselves from the core, and become moving elements again, maybe not for long, but enough to make the picture one of a dynamic system.

The following chapter is mainly based upon stories told by people who were central to the genesis of Buddhist groups in Norway. The first paragraphs draws from stories about this genesis, then I move on to probing aspects of their stories pertaining to their own personal way into Buddhism. I sensed an intransitive dimension, in the sense that people narrated historical events that could have been confirmed and verified by anybody present at the time. My impression of an intransitive dimension solidified as more and more people, independent of each other, told me about the very same events, only from slightly different perspectives. These are events I will narrate in this chapter.

## **5.2 *Beginnings***

Returning to the little house in the woods was a very different experience from my first encounter. This time I was driven by a friend, no walking through the woods. I could be driven because the road had been extended; now it actually crossed the yard between the house and the meditational hut. A lot of houses had been built in the area in the seven years that had passed since I first visited. Karma Tashi Ling was no longer in the periphery of the residential area. When arriving at KTL again, the house itself looked just like before, even though the surroundings had changed. It was even the same woman who opened the door as the first time. The kitchen had been refurnished, but otherwise everything seemed as worn and torn as before. A man had moved into one of the rooms upstairs, he had just broken up from his marriage, and was staying here while looking for a new place to live. I was going to stay in one of the other rooms upstairs for a couple of weeks, doing retreat. Retreat is time spent immersing oneself in meditational practice. It was also an opportunity for getting to know the social environment better. The experience would provide a better basis for making choices regarding how to proceed when continuing fieldwork. The year was 2001; it was January, winter and cold.

### 5.2.1 “Flower power”

In 1975 quite a different group of people were about to move into the very same house. Sixteen “flower-power” youngsters wanted to live in a commune. One of my informants who lived at KTL at that time, tells me that

*“We had a spiritual community at KTL. The alternative wave at that time was different from the alternative wave now, which is more bourgeois. At that time it was more about leaving society and finding a way to live, instead of a worldly career. We worked at a graveyard a couple of months, earning enough money to meditate the rest of the year. It was very cheap to live there, and we lived on cereal and vegetarian food, reading lots of books and stuff”.*

Heelas says that fascination with “Eastern spirituality” goes back many centuries, but that something did change in the sixties: “Where people living in the West before had the main influence by way of literature, the sixties and seventies brought a practical vigor with the development of monasteries and centers” (1999:55). The stories that my informants told me, can be understood as elaborations on this practical vigor, as it manifested itself in Norway in the late sixties and seventies. Indeed, this is the time when the groups that I encountered in this project formed, and the basis for what was to become the Buddhist society was made.

One of the people I met had been part of KTL from the very first day, Flemming Skahjem-Eriksen. Through several conversations with many people at KTL he was upheld as an enormous prime mover. He also did me a great favor. He managed to gather these former hippies to an informal meeting, or rather a chat, where I could be a participant with my recorder, pen and paper. The spirit of the meeting I experienced as the uplifting one of friends reuniting after years of separation. As well as a delightful evening, it provided me with an insight into the very genesis of KTLBS. I learnt that they had started up as a group, meeting on a regular basis to meditate in an apartment in downtown Oslo. Then the 16.Gyalwa Karmapa had told them to look for a place for themselves. He visited in Oslo in 1974<sup>23</sup>. One of the former hippies characterizes themselves as some a kind of groupies at the time, traveling through Scandinavia with Karmapa. Karmapa made a strong impression, the experience of meeting him seemed to manifest itself physically:

*“I remember walking towards Karmapa. While walking towards him, I felt his gaze, it was very much centered and his face was filled with compassion. I walked up*

<sup>23</sup> I was told that he visited again in 1977, that in 1981 he left his body, and that what is understood as his new tulku, new incarnation, is the 17.Karmapa, born in 1997.

*to him and bowed my head. He put his hands on my head, and I could feel it from the top of my head down to my toes: A flash of light. A flash of energy rushed all through my body. It felt like coming home. The deepest layers of energy in me were touched by him. I felt that this was right for me”.*

This would not be the last time somebody explained their experiences in terms of bodily reactions, referring to some kind of bodily certainty, and it would not be the last time that truth and experience beyond words would be pointed out as interlinked. Neither would it be the last time that *spatial dimensions* were evoked, as in “the *deepest layers of energy*”. The expression “*it felt like coming home*” would also turn out to be a recurring metaphor, as would the word “*touch*”.

Karmapa gave Karma Tashi Ling its name, which I am told means “the beneficent place for Buddha activity”.

The first period at KTL had been a little difficult, I was told. These idealistic youngsters wanted to be kind and open towards everybody. For instance, locking the doors at night was not even in question. “*We practiced idiot-compassion...*” is the ironic comment of one of them now. This including attitude had the unfortunate consequence that some very troubled people invaded their commune. KTL is located not very far from a psychiatric institution, which may have contributed to this disturbance. One person had been very threatening, and during an outburst of physical violence they had had to call the police. “*Not everybody was as dangerous as him, but they were all as cuckoo as a Bavarian clock*” I was told. Another person did things like shitting in the bread pans. “*It was the wild, wild west*” they could tell me. In addition to these problems, there was the challenge of deciding how to divide the house chores and how to live together. A man tells me that

*“Some people would just sit and talk all day, and became almost cranky if they had to lift their feet. Spiritual loafers! We also had to put a stop to the culture of intoxication and pot. Drugs forbidden! Usually such signs are not necessary... You don’t find them at the City Hall! But it was important to be clear about it, as a lot of strange people would come falling in, who had seen the Buddha on LSD and stuff. We had ambitions at that time... It was a little bit half monastic. Loud music and dancing was forbidden. There were discussions about that music thing, though...*

They had been about 15-16 people in the beginning, with different motivations. Today one of them comments:

*“It is a miracle we got through that period!”*

But they did get through this period, even though it had caused a few people to move.

In 1977 they got their own Lama named Talo. He had been asked to become a missionary by Karmapa, because of the rising interest in Buddhism in the West. *“Let’s send someone and see what happens”* as one of my informants put it. Lama Talo got a short course, and then he was sent to Norway, which was purely accidental, I am told. He was originally destined to go to France, but for some reason he did not go there. The person supposed to come to Norway, ended up in Calcutta.

*“Lama Talo kept the place in order. Made sure that everything looked nice. He did his prayers and meditations. Took care of the place. He found a way that he could live with, that we also could live with. Our relationship was very special”.*

Lama Talo became quite a respected man at KTL, much loved. This I gather from many conversations with people who remember him. It took Lama Talo to point out the obvious solution to preventing ‘crazy people’ from invading the house: “Why don’t you lock the doors?” In the beginning Lama Talo was quite a surprise to the people living at KTL: Their ideas of what a Lama should be like were totally shattered, I was told, Lama Talo met none of their initial expectations. He was a tiny, skinny man, missing a tooth. *“We expected a lama to sing nicely. Lama Talo didn’t. He sang extremely false”.* Lama Talo spoke no English, nor Norwegian. They got an interpreter, who stayed for five years, living at KTL, translating. I am told he became a binding link between Lama Talo and the Norwegians. But even when getting an interpreter they had difficulties, they told me. To this day they are still uncertain whether this was due to Lama Talo having a special dialect, or whether he had a little speech defect. And in addition to the problem of understanding what he said, they had diverging opinions and expectations regarding what the practice itself should entail, I am told. Lama Talo expected everybody to attend hours of so called puja, rituals with singing, morning and night. Such frequent and long lasting practice was hard in itself on the idealistic, but inexperienced youngsters, they tell me. Furthermore, I am told that participating at the rituals and meditations was anything but an esthetic experience, due to the false singing, and the translators having trouble understanding Lama Talo. However, when talking to me now, they point out to me that this difficult beginning may have been a blessing in disguise:

*“Some places that have had a flying start have gotten a lot of problems later. We had to build this up very slowly, which may have been an advantage in this regard”.*

In another interview with one of the people who have been central to the formation of KTL, Lama Talo is described as

*“coming from a totally different world. It was as if he had fallen down here from the middle ages, like the protagonist in the TV-series “Catweazle”<sup>24</sup>. It must have been pretty tough, he came from a Tibetan convent, and suddenly he is in the middle of a group of Norwegian youngsters. He kept it going, though, and we kept it going, and we developed a special kind of communication. It created a form of strength. He had an enormous will to stand for what he believed in. He had an engagement, through and through. He was to be trusted a hundred percent.”*

Lama Talo would be described as great in many different ways throughout my fieldwork. A woman told me during informal conversation, that the first time she saw Lama Talo, she perceived him as physically enormous, as being very, very tall. Later on she could see that he was rather tiny. She reflects on this as being the result of his greatness, manifesting physically before her eyes. She tells me that there are also stories about the historical Buddha being extremely tall. This, she ponders, could be the same phenomenon: A greatness that has nothing to do with actual meters and centimeters, yet experienced as physical.

I am told that Lama Talo could not understand why people went skiing when they could do prostrations. But that there were other aspects of life here that seemed to appeal to him very much: He had TV installed, and watched football matches with great interest. Through informal chatting with people at KTL, I am told about an event, when everybody was waiting for Lama Talo to begin the Puja. He was late. And through the thin walls they could hear him cheering his lungs out – he was watching football!

KTL was evolving. They started having several Tibetan teachers visiting the center on a regular basis, and they arranged summer courses etc. Lama Talo was central in laying the foundation for continued activities at the center, beyond his own life span. Khandro Rinpoche<sup>25</sup>, a female teacher, came for the first time in 1993. The story goes that Lama Talo

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<sup>24</sup> “The series featured Geoffrey Bayldon as the title character, an eccentric, incompetent, dishevelled and smelly (but lovable) old 11<sup>th</sup> Century wizard who accidentally travels through time to the year 1970 and befriends a young red-headed boy, nicknamed Carrot (Robin Davies), who spends most of the rest of the series attempting to hide Catweazle from his father and farmhand Sam. Meanwhile Catweazle searches for a way to return to his own time whilst hiding out in 'Castle Saburac', a disused water tower, with his “familiar”, a toad called Touchwood” (From Wikipedia, author unknown, <http://www.answers.com/topic/catweazle>, last accessed 2007-10-30).

<sup>25</sup> At the homepage of KTLBS you can read that she was born in Kalimpong, India, in 1967. At the age of two she was recognized by His Holiness the 16th Karmapa, as the reincarnation of the Great Dakini of Tsurpu, Khandro Ugyen Tsomo,



went to visit her: he sat down and proclaimed that he would not leave until she promised to visit KTL for a week. Finally she agreed to do so. This story bears resemblance to other Buddhist stories I have read, about people going through a lot before becoming accepted by a teacher. Khandro Rinpoche's visit in Norway became a success, and since 1995 she has visited KTL practically every year. Roar Vestre is a Norwegian who came to the center in 1978. He attended education to become a Lama in the beginning of the eighties. This made it possible to present Dharma, the teachings, in Norwegian. It was Roar Vestre who had been the teacher when I first attended the Monday meditations. In 1993 Lama Changchub came to KTL. Lama Talo and Lama Changchub had shared the same master. Lama Changchub tells me during an interview, that during his three year retreat Lama Talo had come to him, and said that he wanted him to go to Norway. He said that Lama Changchub could stay for a year, and see how it went. Lama Changchub himself says, that *"one year passed, and here I am..."* A year after Lama Changchub came to KTL, Lama Talo died. This made it difficult for Lama Changchub to leave, he felt responsibility, he tells me. I ask him if he would have left if he had not felt obliged to stay. He answers that *"I am well adapted to Norway, the climate"* and adds beamingly: *"- and I am not allergic to the people anymore...!"* He laughs. Lama Changchub is famous for his jokes; he laughs easily, kids around, but returns to serious reflection in a second.

*"I can go to India as much as I want, and stay as long as I want. It is just a question of money. If I could not go, it would have been like a prison. But the situation is flexible".*

Lama Talo's life ended in a special way, I am told. He got cancer in the stomach, and had surgery. He became very, very thin and ill, and he was told he could die anytime. I am told that he decided that the pension he got the last year should be donated to his convent in Tibet. And he wanted to donate it himself. He and Lama Changchub went there together, and returned to Norway. I am described how he became even thinner, and seemed to live on pure will. He was hospitalized two weeks before he died. My informants put emphasis on him being very clear and present during the whole process. An informant tells me during an interview that the clock in his house had stopped the moment Lama Talo died. The same thing had happened to one of the other people's clocks. *"To this day the clock is not ticking"* he tells me. A group of people visited the Gumpa, where Lama Talo's body had been laid.

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"who was one of the most well known female masters of her time". Khandro is a teacher in both the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. She speaks English very well (which I can verify from attending summer courses with her), Tibetan as well as Hindi dialects, and has completed a western education from St. Joseph's Convent, Wynberg Allen, and St. Mary's Convent in India. She has been teaching in Europe, North America and Southeast Asia since 1987 (KTLBS homepage, <http://www.tibetansk-buddhisme.no/artikkel/Khandro-Rinpoche.htm>, , last accessed 2007-11-17)

Leaving the Gumpa they had turned around, and they saw a beautiful rainbow over the little house.

When I first heard the story about the rainbow, I thought it was a beautiful narrative twist. Later I learnt to see the story in a different context, one that has to do with Tibetan Buddhist ontology. The Rainbow Body is a phenomenon that Sogyal Rinpoche explains as something that accomplished practitioners can achieve, through the advanced practices of Dzogchen: “As they die, they enable their body to be reabsorbed back into the light essence of the elements that created it, and consequently their material body dissolves into light and disappears completely. This process is known as the "rainbow body" or "body of light", because the dissolution is often accompanied by spontaneous manifestations of light and rainbows (Sogyal Rinpoche 1998:167-169). When I read this, the story about the rainbow acquired an epistemological density that it did not have when I heard it the first time. What first appeared to me as a narrative twist became a story in itself, a story about Lama Talo’s death as not being the end.

I was told that Lama Talo’s death was not the end, neither of him, nor of KTLBS. I am told that a lot of very resourceful people have appeared at the center, and that it is thanks to these people who have become involved that the center has been able to survive and grow.

### **5.2.2 Parallel events**

About the same time as the young hippies established KTL, a man named Arne Tørjesen put an ad in a newspaper in Oslo. He wanted to get in touch with other people interested in Zen. Another man, Helge Gundersen, answered. There is no point in making any of these men anonymous here, as I am merely summing up events in history that are well known among many because of the central position of the mentioned personalities. Arne Tørjesen and Helge Gundersen had practiced Zen meditation by themselves until they met and started practicing together. In the beginning they were working without any formal connection to any tradition. They established the Zen school in 1972. The Zen school became the precursor of what today constitutes the Rinzai Zen Center, the place where my formerly described sit-and-run-episode took place. The Zen school was also the precursor of the Dharma Group, due to a split later on.

I am told that in the Zen school a field of tension developed between those who wanted to connect to a tradition, and those who did not. Arne Tørjesen, Helge Gundersen and a man named Frode Rathe<sup>26</sup> were the first ones to contact a Japanese tradition, represented by Sasaki Roshi. Sasaki Roshi came to Norway a couple of times I am told, in 1984 and in 1986, and some of the members of the group visited California where he has a convent. Some members wanted to connect to Sasaki, others wanted to stake out their own course. It ended up with the dominating section connecting to Sasaki. The others “*just disappeared*” as some of my informants put it, and did not form any new group to their knowledge. In the late eighties the next “*big quake*” as an informant calls it, took place. This time it ended with a formation of a new group, formed by a few people leaving the Zen group. This new group was the beginning of the Dharma Group, established in the fall of 1989.

Dharma Sah (not to be confused with the Dharma Group) has a history that does not intertwine as much with the other groups mentioned, I am told. It started out with a Korean Zen master who came to the USA, and developed his own Buddhist movement. Some people in Asker (near Oslo) became involved here. Then there was a schism between the Zen master and Dae Poep Sa Nim who is their teacher today. In Norway there were more people following her than him, so the group continued with her as their teacher, but quite a few people were “*lost*” (as some informants put it) during the splitting process. In the beginning she used to travel every week to the different centers around the world, visiting Norway frequently, up to four times a year, I am told. This is no longer so, but the people who belong to this group go to her centers frequently, I am told. Dae Poep Sa Nim lives in Hawaii, but she has centers also elsewhere in Europe, in many different countries.

The same people who initiated the Zen school also initiated an umbrella organization. In this process KTLBS was contacted, and KTLBS together with the Zen group became the first members of what became *The Buddhist Society*. Kåre Lie, a man interested in Theravada Buddhism was contacted by Helge Gundersen, and through Kåre Lie<sup>27</sup> a Theravada group was started, embracing people in the so called Vipassana-tradition who did not belong to what my informants call “*one of the other ethnic groups*” (the Vietnamese and the Thai). Later on other groups were added as well. The ambition was to get a multiplicity of traditions organized, and they succeeded. The Buddhist Society was supposed to have two

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<sup>26</sup> I am not making people anonymous when referring to official historical events, where the people in question have played a well known, central and revered part.

<sup>27</sup> Today Kåre Lie is a well known author and translator, who also translates Buddhist texts from Pali.

representatives from each group, I am told. The Buddhist Society was intended to have coordinating functions, arranging celebrations of the birthday of the Buddha, Vesak (New Year celebrations), etc. To this very day the main activities are to be found in the different groups. Since that time the number of groups organized in the Buddhist Society has steadily increased, as has the size of the existing groups.

### 5.2.3 Ongoing processes: some causes and implications

The dynamics I have pointed out in the former paragraphs have implications. For instance, spending time in the Buddhist groups makes it clear that the amount of people who visit the Buddhist groups add up to a much larger number than what can be found as registered members. There are other factors that also contribute to keep the number of *registered* Buddhists down, compared to *actual practitioners*. Many people participate on a regular basis without actually defining themselves as Buddhists (or at least, not yet, what will happen over time is another matter). Some people said that they rather defined themselves as “*Buddhist sympathizers*”. There are also quite a few people I talked to at Buddhist arrangements who said that they do define themselves as Buddhists, they just have not signed up for membership. When I asked why not, some would say that they had not felt the need for becoming a member, or they simply had not got around to it yet. Some people had not found out which tradition they “*belonged to*” yet. This belonging was usually talked about as already existing; it was just a matter of discovering it.

One person makes a statement that is characteristic for a much more wide-spread way of thinking:

*“I don’t feel that I am rejecting Christianity because I follow the way of the Buddha. It is difficult when people say, oh yeah, so you are a Buddhist... I don’t want to be categorized”*

In fact, some devoted practitioners declared that a true Buddhist should not call her/himself a Buddhist. One of the Norwegian Buddhist teachers told me about one time he had been asked if he was a Buddhist. He had answered that

*“I am not a Buddhist, I have never been a Buddhist, and I will never become a Buddhist”.*

I also encountered the opposite claim, that it was important to declare oneself a Buddhist:

*“I declare myself a Buddhist, and I pronounce it loud and clear. We should have worn emblems telling the world that we are Buddhists. Because then we will be*

*confronted with questions regarding Buddhism, which can contribute to our awareness”*

The reason given was that telling the world that one is a Buddhist is a way to start discussions, which would function as a means of challenging ones own beliefs. These two approaches may seem quite different. But there is a *common denominator* between the telling and the not-telling approaches: the necessity of challenging one’s own beliefs (by telling one is a Buddhist), and the necessity of not categorizing oneself (by not defining oneself as a Buddhist). Both approaches (telling and not-telling) reflect an understanding of *flexibility* as important, and *rigidity* as something to be avoided. Both approaches stem from an idea about *letting go* as basic. The social landscapes I encountered in this project cannot be understood through snapshots alone, or by probing ‘observable facts’ like the number of registered Buddhists. We are rather dealing with ongoing processes inseparable from certain ways of thinking about reality.

## 5.3 Tracing patterns

### 5.3.1 Narrating beginnings

In the next paragraphs I will be sticking with the stories told by people who took part in the genesis of the Buddhist groups. Only this time I am teasing out aspects pertaining to their personal ways into Buddhism. It turned out that their stories had certain recurring themes and common denominators in this regard as well. Not only did they portray some of the same events, but the ways in which these events were portrayed had certain similarities.

The early sixties were often described by my informants as a time when Buddhism was not much of an issue in their nearest surroundings. The story of Arne Tørjesen putting an ad in the paper is illustrative of a situation many of them seem to have had in common: people told me that they had to reach out actively to get in touch with others having the same interests. A man tells me that

*“I had this wish of owning a Buddha-statue when I was about nine years old.*

*But I never got one; it was simply not to be found in “Smallville”<sup>28</sup> in the sixties.”*

Another man tells me that

*“I did not get in touch with other Buddhists until the late sixties. The word*

*“Buddhism” was not to be found in papers or magazines, it was a non-issue.”*

<sup>28</sup> I will be using the name “Smallville” instead of the real name when my informants refer to towns much smaller than Oslo.

Having said that he continues:

*“But when you are interested in something, you see it. I remember changing windows in a house; I saw nothing but windows when driving around! That’s just the way it is. If you are interested in Buddhism, you will react to the smallest sign of it.”*

This informant tells me about an interest sensitizing him to anything that was related to Buddhism in his surroundings. Many stories told of small signs that were to be found for those on the lookout, for instance a note on a wall of posters, or particular books in the library.

There were certain common denominators in the stories of people who became interested in Buddhism in the sixties and seventies. Meditation was something most of them reported being acquainted with from other arenas before becoming engaged in Buddhism. Many had for instance been followers of Maharishi, and/or practiced Transcendental meditation:

*“The way I got into this, I have been doing different kinds of meditations since the late sixties, since Maharishi was in Norway. I started with Transcendental Meditation, which was later split into Transcendental Meditation and ACEM. Some in the West found Transcendental Meditation too “Eastern inspired”, with flowers and incense, they wanted to make it more “Western”. So there was this split into two branches. I practiced TM<sup>29</sup> for quite a few years.”*

Some had spent time with Sai Baba<sup>30</sup>, and though expressing a skeptical attitude today, the experience was held up as a central one. The element of traveling was also something that came up often:

*“I grew up in the Beatles-time, you know, when they went to India. I went to India, too, a year before I converted to Buddhism. I spent time with Sai Baba. It was just incredible what happened. I stayed there for almost a year. A lot happened. I discovered that we live in a magical universe.”*

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<sup>29</sup> At the TM homepage, you can read that Transcendental Meditation or TM was introduced in 1958 by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. It involves the mental use of specific sounds, called mantras. The technique is supposed to enable the practitioner's mind to “transcend” to a state of “restful alertness”. Maharishi has travelled around the world, teaching this technique. He has written many books that have been translated into several different languages. At their web-page TM is presented as “the science and technology of consciousness”: “Every Maharishi Vedic Science program is “consciousness-based,” designed to promote the full development of human consciousness, and thereby avoid the mistakes that bring suffering to individuals and to the world as a whole. The goal of Maharishi Vedic Science is to allow everyone on earth to live their full birthright—life in accord with Natural Law—enlightenment. Maharishi Vedic Science includes a wide range of Vedic technologies that help us make full use of our mind, body and consciousness — so that we can live a problem-free life in enlightenment” (<http://www.tm.org/maharishi/index.html>, last accessed 2007-10-30).

<sup>30</sup> At Wikipedia you can read that Sathya Sai Baba, born Sathyanarayana Raju (1926- ), is a South Indian guru, often referred to as “miracle worker”. His miracles and deeds in general have however been the object of much controversy. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sathya\\_Sai\\_Baba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sathya_Sai_Baba), last accessed 2007)

Traveling was not just about travels to India. A woman became interested in Buddhism while studying in the USA:

*“I had my first encounter in the USA, I had a scholarship to go to college there, it was around 1967-1968, at a small college in Minneapolis. I had to take some mandatory courses, religion or something. So I took a course in the history of religion, and it was mostly about Buddhism and Hinduism. Bhagavadita was one of the books on our curriculum. I had my main emphasis on Buddhism, I found it very fascinating. I was very fascinated by the texts, it was Suzuki, you know, the teachings of the compassionate Buddha. I like paradoxes, the humor in it, sort of, the ways of putting things, you wonder if you are to take it seriously or what. After that I have always been interested in Buddhism.”*

A man tells me about having been involved in the Theosophical Society<sup>31</sup> for years before engaging in Buddhism:

*“I was in the Theosophical Society a few years. [ ] We were religiously interested people who met, twice a month, in a house that the theosophists had had for many years, in what they called the Theosophical Triangle; there were two anthroposophical clubs there, and our house. It was a triangle. We discussed and studied stuff from especially Blavatsky as well as other known theosophists, discussed it and meditated. We were sitting on chairs. There were lectures, and someone could often present an issue that s/he found interesting from theosophical literature, and then we drank tea, and it was very nice. Theosophy is very all-encompassing; it is almost a bit scary. It was so open in its understanding of the religious; everything was equally good, in a way. Almost. But Theosophy does have some old, forgotten wisdom. When they were at their peak, in the beginning of this century, there was a lot of interest in it, also in Norway.”*

In general, what was frequently referred to as “*Eastern inspired philosophies/practices*” was presented as important to the unfolding of a path that would eventually lead to an engagement in Buddhism. Many had started out with an interest in Zen, and reading the books of Suzuki<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> At the Wikipedia you can read that The Theosophical Society was founded in New York City in 1875 by among others H.P. Blavatsky (1831-1891). Its initial objective was the investigation of mediumistic phenomena. However, there was a development where the study of Eastern religions became part of the Society’s agenda, as Olcott and Blavatsky moved to India and established the International Headquarters at Adyar, Madras. Blavatsky as well as certain developments in the Theosophical Society has been the object of much controversy. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosophical\\_Society](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosophical_Society), last accessed 2007-10-30)

and Watts<sup>33</sup> had often been a first introduction. In fact, reading had been important to a lot of my informants; be it mysticism, Hinduism, the writings of Blavatsky or Schopenhauer<sup>34</sup>. The roads to engaging in Buddhist practice were many. But common to the people who played a part in the genesis of Buddhist groups in Norway, was that these roads led to a lasting interest and active involvement. Many of the people I am quoting here have dedicated what I find to be impressive amounts of energy and time to Buddhist practice as well as the organizations and groups, and still do. The knowledge they share with me I find equally impressive.

### 5.3.2 'The body', 'holism', 'oneness'

A central common denominator in the stories of my informants is the emphasis that is put on the body. This would later on turn out to be equally central in the stories of the younger generation of seekers. A woman teaching yoga and Tai Chi tells me that

*"I have grown up with an understanding of the body as very important, it is the basis of everything you do. Body and energy-flow is some of what I have grown up with. That you should be present in your body, and sense what happens and relate to it. To have it with you in everything you do. And that became so much clearer when I started yoga. Also more pleasurable, because these different yoga techniques are so important for harmonizing your body. There is so much more happiness in it when you do that. I have always been very present in my body. I have felt what it does, how it is doing, what's good and what is not. Yoga has increased the consciousness about the body. It works better, and I have so much pleasure from it. The body has a value in itself, apart from holding our heads up and transporting us around. To me it is very important. I am used to a more physical approach. It is easy for me to be a lot in my head when one I just sit still and meditate. I need what you get through the physical element. And to me personally, it is easier to meditate when you have the physical element there. The mind is willing to meditate in a totally different way than if you*

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<sup>32</sup> At the Wikipedia you can read that Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1066) was the author of many books and essays on Buddhism and Zen. He had a profound influence on the widening interest in Zen and "Eastern philosophy" within a western audience ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daisetz\\_Teitaro\\_Suzuki](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daisetz_Teitaro_Suzuki), last accessed 2007-10-30).

<sup>33</sup> At the Wikipedia you can read that Alan Wilson Watts (1915-1973) was a philosopher, writer and speaker interested in comparative religion. He is known for contributing to the widening interest in Asian philosophies within a western audience ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan\\_Watts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Watts), last accessed 2007-10-30).

<sup>34</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a German philosopher. His philosophy has been pointed out as similar to Buddhism in many ways, as it asserts the first three of Buddhism's four truths in that it associates will with desire, appetite, and craving. However, instead of the fourth truth, Schopenhauer describes a twofold path to "Denial of the will". Many of my informants point out Schopenhauer's work as responsible for a basic misconception of Buddhism as representing a pessimistic outlook on life. His philosophy resembles Buddhism, but also differs from it in ways that has led to confusion, I have been told.



*just go and sit down. I think it is important that you also get the body engaged. It does not have to be yoga, but one of the spiritual disciplines that also have a physical side. So that you also use the body. I think that is important for its own sake, and because it helps you digest the philosophical material in a different way. That it is not just mental, but also physical, if you can call it energy integration. [ ]*

I note that she does not use the concept ‘learning’, but she is using concepts that imply *becoming part of*; she reports that the different bodily techniques enhance our ability to *digest* the philosophical material, and this mental-physical process is something she calls *energy integration*. Not only does she claim the importance of the body, but the vocabulary she uses underlines an embodied approach.

I had a scary experience at one of the summer-courses, one that I mentioned to this yoga teacher during our conversation, as my experience had occurred during yoga exercises. We were at the end of the exercise, and we were lying on our backs, breathing in a very specific manner: pushing our stomachs and chests alternating up and down, thus using our muscles to move the air in a way that was supposed to loosen up muscular tensions. Expecting nothing but the mere sensation of physical movement and relaxation, I was scared out of my wits when I in the midst of breathing felt myself like thrown into a black hole. I was still lying there, but the ceiling above was drawn out in a diabolical manner, as an all-encompassing anxiety seeped through my very being. I felt myself totally alone, even though there were people all around me. I stopped the breathing exercise: it seemed obvious to me that the exercise had somehow triggered this. I felt like running away, but I was certain I could not run away from it, this horrible thing was inside me, even though it manifested as tactile changes in my surroundings. All I could do was to lie there, and breathe normally, calmly, hoping it would stop. Maybe I would never get out of this. Maybe I had come to Hell. It might have lasted for only a minute, but it felt like aeons had passed. The angst disappeared, but I was shivering, and I felt fear that this might happen again. I almost expected myself to have turned into an old lady, having been on such a long, frightful journey to Hell. But absolutely nothing had changed; hardly any time had passed – in the outside world. I never dared to participate in that specific kind of exercise again.

When asking the yoga teacher what this experience was all about, she answers:

*“I don’t know, but I can guess. That exercise, it was an exercise which gives a very deep massage of the belly area. And the belly is one of the places where emotions get stuck as tensions. And, two of the feelings we feel with our stomach is*

*anger, irritation, we tense up our stomach. And if we get scared, experience anxiety, we tense up our stomach. It does not take more than one experience for us to get such a shock that it sticks in the muscles, deep inside, because you have been so scared. And when you do that exercise, you loosen up that tension, and you can get the type of experience you just described. I would guess that's what happened".*

I asked her, so what do I do? Should I be careful, not engage in this kind of activities, or what?

*"No. It is sort of a catharsis. When you do that kind of thing in therapy, you will be asked to try to figure out where that anxiety comes from, what situation that triggered it in the first place. In yoga you might sometimes get a glimpse of the situation that scared you, but it can also be the pure experience of anxiety. And that experience in itself may be liberating. You may never experience it again. You may experience it again, but as you have already experienced it once, you know you survived. Knowing that is a comfort in those situations. But I would not expect it to happen again. But if it did, I would not consider it any danger. Just abandon yourself to it... (laughs) We have that in Buddhism as well as yoga, that when something like that happens, try to be in the experience, and it passes. The alternatives we often operate with, is either trying to run away, or saying "no, no", denying it. Or wallowing in it: "it was like this and that, and what can it be caused by", right. Really wallowing in it. But what we do in meditation is just being present, not letting oneself being pulled along, and not running away. Just being present, observing. And I think that is also the most effective approach. Because, how do you achieve peace if you cultivate unrest all the time? And we know that sweeping stuff under the carpet is no solution. This is what Buddhism calls the middle way; just standing there, observing, just being in the moment, allowing things to be as they are, then it lets go. It is not unusual to experience such things as you just told me about. When you work with techniques that dissolve deep tension, then you get a glimpse of what created it. I think it is good. It is exciting that one can find methods that can help in the process of letting go. I am not playing down your experience, or telling you that "it is just anxiety", but the alternatives could have been years of psychoanalysis!"*

My informants told me about engagement in many different bodily techniques. One of the men that I talk to is primarily engaging in Chi at the time. He tells me that

*"I have been doing Tai Chi for many years. Bioelectrical energy, or to put it theosophically, Chi is the electricity of life. It is what makes life. And it moves*

*through certain conduits in a body. This is what is being manipulated with needles or acupuncture. When you are sick, the Chi stream is hindered, it is like logs in a river. Get the logs out, so it can flow again! The last couple of years I have been a bit ill, and I have taken up Chi again to make it circulate in the mainstreams, from the head and down. When you sit in the full lotus position, with your tongue up behind your teeth, it is not just a chance invention, it is to make you straight, making it easier for Chi to flow. The postures are Chi Gong postures. (demonstrates). It is being activated when you sit in a vital position; it is good for your health. It is good that you can sit controlled and calm, you become calmer of mind.*

*It is also a postulate that body and mind is one, it is often an empty phrase, right. But in Zen I would say it is a fact. At least I approach it as a fact. And we say to beginners that it is not easy to get a hold of your mind... where is it...? But we can get a hold of the body. It is here. If it is the same thing, we try to regulate the body, try to get it in balance. If the body is balanced and calm, the mind is, too. And that makes me think about, there is dead and living sitting. Dead and living meditation. By dead I mean that you can sit formally correct in a beautiful lotus position, doing everything by the book, you can get top grades from all the Zen teachers for how great you are sitting, but nothing happens. You can have a top car, a Rolls Royce, but it does not run! It is a silly comparison, but there is such a thing as unproductive sitting. One can argue about it, because, what are we supposed to produce? What we are supposed to produce is a hostess' nightmare: if an angel comes into the room... The party is about keeping conversation going. In Zen it is the other way around; we are supposed to produce angels! Silent, shining, peaceful, calm..."*

His explanation is another example of how the connection between body and mind is emphasized. What is more, his way of telling conjures up dynamic movement, as in *circulation of energy*, and as in the emphasis on *living sitting* as opposed to *dead sitting*. These are elements that would turn out to be central in the stories of most of my informants.

A woman tells me that

*"I work with psychomotoric treatment. It is physiotherapy, but with an additional education where we focus on the unity between body and soul, or psyche. Psychomotoric. You could say that it is something in between physical treatment and going to psychotherapy. I am not a psychotherapist, but through the physical easing of tension a lot of thoughts and feelings will often surface, and the patient can share*

*them with me, people have a need for putting words on experience. Just putting words on experience is a healing process in itself. [ ]*

*People go to this treatment for a long time, processes are started, it is not just something you do and are done with, as opposite to ordinary physiotherapy where you are given a shoulder or a neck and work with it. On the contrary; it holism that counts, all the time. Because what happens is that if you have a stiff neck and soften it up, the tensions may move elsewhere in the body, because there is an underlying cause that is not being put into words. That happens sometimes when people go to a physiotherapist. Their neck may be fine for a while, and then they get tensions elsewhere, or maybe the neck trouble returns afterwards. Because the underlying cause has not been addressed. We try to think holistically.”*

This woman combines an emphasis on “*the healing power of putting words on experience*”, with emphasis on processes that can be started by way of working with “*tensions in the body*”. Tensions are understood as signs of underlying causes, and to get to them, this cause has to be addressed. That presupposes what she refers to as “*holistic thinking*”, yet another element emphasized by most of my informants. I also note that also this woman conjures up a reality of *movement*, she talks about processes, indirectly as in *easing of tension* and *softening up*, and directly: *healing processes*.

There seem to be no great gaps between the different activities that my informants tell me about engaging in. On the contrary, they report that a new practice often becomes a relevant option because they are seen as related to practices engaged in earlier. In this sense my informants tell me about continuity. An informant tells me that her interest in Buddhist meditation started with the practice of Chi Gong:

*“It started with the Chi Gong. We had meditations there, too. That was my first encounter with daily practice. I did that a few years, and I was good at following it up. That’s the way it started. It was a very natural transition to continue with meditation.”*

Going from Chi Gong to Buddhist meditation is seen as a “*natural transition*”. The same woman tells me about different courses and activities that she has been attending:

*“I have been to a few courses at the woman’s university; visualizations, energy work. And Chakras and stuff, it has become a common concept. It belongs in Chinese and Indian philosophy. So I have done that a bit, and I have been interested in aromatherapy, and yoga. In this Chi gong tradition, a Chinese teacher comes here regularly. It is a series of movements, for instance, seven different series. He talks*

*about “heavenly mother”, and I think “great, he does not say father!” He operates with some kind of vague concept of God, not much defined. He has an idea of all religions coming together as one. So it is very characteristic that his series are called “Jesus standing Chi Gong” and “Jesus sitting Chi gong”. And very basic is the Kuan Yin Standing Chi Gong<sup>35</sup>, it is the basis. The step over to meditation is not a big leap, because breathing is so central.”*

In our conversation she points out that *“the step over to meditation is not a big leap, because breathing is so central”*. It is interesting that she does that, because I have not asked any questions about the similarities or differences between the activities that she has engaged in. My observation of continuity in the stories did not occur to me until I had finished fieldwork. The theme of interconnection is an issue she introduces on her own initiative, and she keeps coming back to it, elaborating upon it in ways that to me indicate that this has been well thought through long before I entered the picture. She, like many other informants, presents events in her life as a *path of continuity*, in which *bodily techniques* tend to be central. She also introduces continuity by way of telling me that *“his series are called ”Jesus Standing Chi Gong”, ”Jesus Sitting Chi Gong”, “Mohammed Standing Chi Gong” and “Mohammed Sitting Chi Gong”*. Instead of presenting different spiritual traditions as oppositions, emphasis is put on similarity: she points out the existence of some basic spiritual experience common to these traditions.

### **5.3.3 Beyond plurality**

A lot of informants told me they had encountered many mutually exclusive claims of truth early in life, and this had made it difficult to subscribe to any specific religion:

*“I grew up in an ordinary Norwegian home, right, with evening prayers and on Christmas Eve we went to church. My mom, who was half Catholic, grew up beside a convent. My neighbor was a very firm atheist, and at school my best friend was a Pentecostalist. Religion was sort of close to me. Maranata, there were some people living on our street. Religion was very much in my proximity. And I wondered how one got born into it? I had a lot of thoughts like that when I was little. I had questions about a lot of different things, how one could be able to say that “this is the only truth”.*

As an adult he kept pondering these issues, he tells me:

*“In the Middle East where I lived for quite a while, you can go through one door, and hear that “we have the truth”. Then you walk fifty meters to a different*

<sup>35</sup> Later on she explains to me that Kuan Yin is the Chinese name of Buddha Avalokiteshvara.

*door, and hear that “we have the truth”. And those truths are mutually exclusive. And, ok, you can go in and hear that we have the recipe for a happy society in Norway, you may go to the right wing parties, and you may go to the left wing parties, and you will hear the same thing. And at a relative level that’s ok. But when it comes to eternity and salvation and the divine, it has just stranded for me. I have never been able to say that “this is it”, sort of. Meeting people, like in Jerusalem, and actually when seeking out people and traveling around, and in a way people believe their own stuff, and when it comes to eternity, and it is about reward and punishment and all that, I have not quite been able to handle it. So I guess I have been a bit in a limbo, a bit floating, I have not quite been able to say that “I am this” or “I am that”. I may have defined myself as one or the other for short periods of time, but I have never been totally involved. There has always been this sense that there was something wrong.”*

The observation that many different truths were being claimed, truths that were mutually exclusive, was central in the stories of many of my informants. It seemed like one of their challenges was to get a grip on the observation of a pluralism filled with contradictions. All of my informants expressed a skeptical attitude towards any claim to ultimate truth. The way they expressed themselves, however, would differ. A woman says as follows:

*“Actually I am a bit skeptical to the formation of groups, I am a bit cautious. I am not that way that I want a saved group. I think it is important to be allowed to be critical, to ask critical questions, that there is an opening for that. That’s where Buddhism is at its best; asking questions is not prohibited. There are probably many different Buddhist environments that are very different, we may be seeing the best part of it. But it is sort of a basic thesis that you are not supposed to take anything for granted. That you have to experience things for yourself. I have always been very skeptical. My dad was a minister, and I always felt that, so much of what I say will be a comparison with Christianity in a way, as I grew up in that tradition. But I became a bit peripheral to that. I have never been really rebellious, but I did not like the Christian environment at school. It was too little stimulating intellectually. You were not supposed to be critical. So from the very start, friends said to me that “you started being critical long before you became confirmed”.. I cannot remember that, but I believe it is right, that in general I am one standing on the sideline, asking questions.”*

Being allowed to be critical, in fact being in a social environment cultivating a critical attitude is something this woman tells about as very important to her. She continues:

*“I can become very provoked when Christians get near me, because I find the attitude of ”Only-I-know-the-truth” very provoking. It really provokes me.”*

A man points out that

*“You have to criticize all the time. A lot in Buddhist philosophy is negation, in the sense that it is about rejecting everything.”*

The same man tells me that the first years, before the Zen school sought out connection to a tradition, they worked on a concept they called the “no-function”:

*“Try it once! Test it out, when there is a meeting or a situation where everything is just a mess or nonsense, just shout NO! And see what happens... A powerful NO! It zeros out, it puts all minds at point blank. Suddenly everything is empty, and one can begin... In many ways it is an insane “no”, a “no” to absolutely everything. Then the whole of reality is there, as it is.*

*Language and concepts, very important, it is what makes us human, but when we are trapped by language, we are just trapped. If we don’t see that it is just tools for use in communication, but believe that reality is accessible through language, it is not true. Language can merely point. You cannot describe reality, it has to be experienced.”*

Through many different stories told by many different people, reality would be pointed out as only accessible through experience. Some aspects of pluralism and contradiction are pointed out as generated by language. Moving beyond language is explained as a means of transcending such pluralism and contradiction. My informants can be understood as “going between the horns of the dilemma”, as Strauss puts it (1997:304), by way of doing what she says is introducing levels beyond opposition, where phenomena no longer are seen as opposed to each other, but rather as floating, interconnected continuities.

### **5.3.4 Stories of continuity**

Continuity is introduced in the stories of my informants in many different ways, at many different levels. The following informant narrates continuity when elaborating on how his interest in Buddhism got started. He makes his childhood point of departure:

*“If people ask how I have become a Buddhist, I have several alternative answers. I am born a Buddhist, and I have probably been a Buddhist for generations. That is a joking answer.. (laughs). But the answer I like the best is – I have this*

*romantic version – that I have lived like a Buddha myself. I was a lonely child for 8 years, so I was a spoilt prince... Now, that is bracketed, because it was not possible to be spoilt in the situation I was in. I grew up on a farm that the Germans had occupied. And my dad, who was a sailor, came home right before the war started and went unemployed. In short, we were very poor. We were proletarians, living in one room. Being spoilt was not a possibility... But I was a funny guy, from what I hear, when I was little. Very active. I have seen pictures of me when I was 1, 2, 3 and 4, it looks like I would have enjoyed destroying things and stuff... That was the period I was spoilt and protected like prince Siddhartha.*

*But in my teens I had my eyes opened, I really experienced life on my body, the world just poured in over me. It started when my dad became a real alcoholic from I was about nine or ten, and after that he always drank. He even drank the money he did not have... So that was pretty tough. My very fundament crumbled. My mom was worried and nervous, and never got around to handling him in a reasonable way, so there was a lot of fighting and arguing. It was a very unpleasant childhood.*

*And these things made me reflect a lot as a teenager, I pondered if this was how it was supposed to be. I thought it was a very unhappy situation to be in. But there are a couple of other things that I was wondering about, that I don't understand now afterwards, I may have been about 8, I think I must have had a glimpse of enlightenment. I remember the situation so well. Suddenly I was looking across the garden and at the hedge and it was summer, and suddenly I understood that this is the way the world is. One calls it a firsthand-glimpse. I keep it in my treasure box... I have not been able to analyze what happened. But that is one of my private myths, that I was enlightened for a few seconds... (laughs)*

*OK. But in short. The Buddha discovered that there was aging, disease and death. And the same way I, too, discovered that the world was full of suffering. But what is often forgotten in that story is that the Buddha also heard about ascetics and yogis and meditators. He did not just see a dead body, he also saw a yogi. And I did too, eventually. And that was very difficult at that time. I am talking about Norway in the fifties, there was little or nothing that I could get hold of in my surrounding about other religions, especially not Buddhism. I guess I had a talent for it; I had a lot of talents that were never developed. That's what I think about myself, because of the turbulence at home. I never got to concentrate on homework and stuff like that. But enough about that. I did what I could. I read the Bible, of course, I listened to what the ministers said, and I found no comfort in it. There was no satisfaction. I started*



*reading psychology books, and philosophy. I must add that I had been at the public library and read a book by Schopenhauer, which I had heard was supposed to be a great book. I read a thick book that I did not understand much of. But, I took the title pessimist. I was a pessimist for a long time. I had an identity as a pessimist. Others did not know, but I knew that I had an identity as a pessimist... (laughs)*

*Then, one day I found a thin little book in the shelf called Zen Buddhism. I have gotten hold of it later, it was written by a Japanese man, Suzuki. And it was very, very different from anything I had encountered before. Look, I found it for you. (he shows me the book). I especially remember a particular paragraph there. I understood that this was something else than the usual nonsense. It was not philosophy, it was not psychology; it was a way of thinking that was totally different from what I had encountered before. It was non-Aristotelian; that much I understood. I liked it; it bugged me in a positive way. And then I started to find out what Buddhism was. But there was very little literature to be found, and what's written in lexicons and stuff by non-Buddhists, there is very little nourishment there, to put it that way, for a seeker. I must have been about fifteen, sixteen years old, in the fifties."*

Continuity is introduced on different levels in this story. For one, he tells about a coherent line of events from his childhood, leading up to the point where he is today. Secondly, he also draws lines between the story of the historical Buddha and his own story, thus creating continuity through the linking and comparison of events. By doing so, he is also telling me how the Buddhist truths are truths that he rediscovered through his own experience. Narrating causality and continuity, he also integrates a central tenet in Buddhism: the emphasis on *finding your own truths*.

Some of my informants could tell me a story where their interest in Buddhism had began very early. Very early, indeed:

*"I was a little strange. I was about five years old, and I saw the picture of the Buddha in a book. For some reason it really fascinated me. Dad had to read to me what it said; it was a Buddha in Japan somewhere. And it, it made an impression that I don't quite know what was, but a pretty strong impression.*

*I had this wish, I wanted a desk when I was a bit older, 8-9 years old, and in it was a door, and I had this idea that inside that door I wanted a Buddha statue. I wanted that. But I never got it, because one did not sell things like that in "Smallville" at that time. But I had this idea, inside there was supposed to be a Buddha. I also had the idea that in that room there was supposed to be certain colors,*

*colors that I know recognize from KTL, yellow, red, white and blue. Those colors were supposed to be there. This idea was with me all the time.”*

Later in his life, as an adult, he went to China, taking the train through Siberia and Mongolia and Tibet:

*“And there was something. Something I could not quite understand. Something I could not put my finger to. But there was something. Coming into Buddhist convents, there was something strange, that I will almost compare to what happened when I was five. There was something recognizable. It was... The first thing that I experienced in this convent north in Tibet, I heard this “boom boom boom boom boom”, and I wondered what is this? What is this? Strange sound, right. Then there was something very alien, some kind of lama-dance when we came there. But the sound went right to my stomach. Strange. What is this. Then we went further into Tibet, into Lhasa, and we were there for about three weeks.*

*There was something about people there, there was something about that setting, I circled those places, and even though it was very alien when it comes to wrapping, colors, smells and everything, there was something there that I had never experienced in any church, temple or convent or mosque or anywhere I have been before. But there was something. It made me wonder, what is this? Then I went home, and the year after I went to Kashmir, hiking in the mountains with a group of Swedes. We hiked around for about a month. Then we came to the capital, and there was the Dalai Lama. Of all persons, he was there. And he had a so-called Kalachakra initiation. We were there for only one day, it was a three-day-thing, but we only attended the first day. He invited the few foreigners who were there, I guess we were about 88 altogether. He invited us in there after the teachings, and I sat there, listening to him, and I thought, good grief. What is this about? Because he talked about “start where you are, everyone has a good heart, basically”.*

*I am simplifying what he said, but he said that everybody can start where they are. We all have the ability to goodness. It was totally un-sectarian. He talked about this, that everybody can change. One is able to do something, one is not stuck; one can make a change. And he underlined this, that it does not matter what kind of label you put on it. This triggered something in me. I had read a little before, but now I started reading more. And then I came to KTL. In short, this was my way there.”*

The path into becoming engaged at KTLBS is described as an unbroken line, one that started in childhood. I also note that the encounter with Buddhism in Tibet is described as one of *recognition*. This would turn out to be the case with many of my informants; they would talk

about sensing a *recognition* or *connection*. Some would refer to their encounter with Buddhism as *coming home*. Speaking in terms of recognition add to the sense of continuity conjured up by their stories.

The sense of recognition this informant tells me about, went beyond recognizing the colors that he wanted to have in his desk as a kid. He also talks about “*the sound went right to my stomach*”. The recognition is not limited to visceral experience: it is explained in ways that implicate his whole body, all his senses. He says: “*there was something. Something I could not quite understand. Something I could not put my finger to. But there was something.*” Several times he repeats this “*something*”: “*There was something about people there, there was something about that setting*” and: “*there was something there that I had never experienced in any church, temple or convent or mosque or anywhere I have been before. But there was something*”. He tells me that these experiences “*triggered something in me.*” The use of the word *something* seems to reflect that he is talking about phenomena that are hard to put into words. True, he is very reflective, and the words do flow from his mouth, in a story that I am captivated by. But there are aspects of the experience narrated that seem difficult for him to put into words. What is more, this non-verbal phenomenon, referred to by a single word; *something*, actually seems to be the center in his story. The events that are being narrated seem relevant to narrate precisely because of the centrality of this non-verbal experience.

The story he tells me seems to arise from, and revolve around, a something he cannot pinpoint, at least not verbally. It seems like everything that is being verbally elaborated upon is like the petals on a flower, pointing towards the center of a something where words fall short. Lene Sjørup has written about religious experiences, utilizing the archives at the Alister Hardy Research Center, comparing these with her own interviews with people in North America and Denmark. She talks about “epistemological density”, and says that “the ineffability is closely connected with the epistemological density of these experiences. It is *because* religious experiences of oneness with the divine are so full of knowing, that they cannot be expressed, and conversely: because they cannot be expressed, they are so full of knowing” (Sjørup 1998:119). The “*something*” that my informant keeps returning to, seems to have this in common with what Sjørup calls “religious experience”: the experience he attempts to narrate does not seem to be easily expressed, if at all. It simply seems too dense in epistemological knowing. And just like the religious experiences that Sjørup approaches are moments described as *keynotes*, that she says resound in the rational and articulated lives of

people, so does the “*something*” resound in the narratives of this informant. This way of narrating, adds to my impression of the stories told as merely the tip of the iceberg.

## 6. Discerning patterns

The following chapter is based upon data-material generated by talking with teachers and other people central to the Buddhist groups I visited: about Buddhism in general, and the specific groups and traditions they represented. I also draw upon observations made while spending time at meditations and courses. Participation and interviews turned out to generate very different kinds of knowledge, which together made new patterns and discrepancies arise. In the following chapter I will begin discerning such patterns.

### 6.1 “*The essence of Buddhism*”

#### 6.1.1 KTLBS and the Dharma group

At the Dharma group there was a concern that using liturgy that was not understood, as well as using exotic rituals, could take focus away from what was conceived of as the core of Buddhism, creating what some referred to as dead practice. I was told that a ritual should not be a goal in itself. According to this view, the essence of Buddhism is better taken care of through adapting it to our own culture and language. KTLBS practiced a different view. True, rituals were not supposed to be a goal in themselves here, either. But traditions were explained as also carrying meaning in themselves, even though we might not grasp it at our present level of understanding. The idea was that without fully understanding the relevance of a tradition, one should be very careful about changing it. The argument is that traditions have evolved over time, and they have been fertilized by innumerable enlightened people, so it is not up to unenlightened people to make abrupt changes. Slow changes and adaptation were seen as inevitable, but any deliberate attempt at making radical changes was considered a different matter. I know that what I am saying here is an over-simplification, which I will try to rectify in a moment. But a pattern did crystallize as I listened to more and more people telling me about Buddhism and the tradition that their group belonged to:

There were indeed two different ways of reasoning about and relating to tradition. Both maintain the aim as one of *preserving the essence of Buddhism*. But there were *different ideas about how this preservation best be done*. It would not be correct to say that one group represents just one end of the dichotomy. The dichotomy should rather be understood as something every group somehow relates to actively. The question regarding what Buddhism

should and could be constitutes a conglomerate of theoretical and pragmatic issues. These are issues that will have to be debated as long as there are people practicing Buddhism. The groups I spent time with in Norway did not appear out of thin air. They have a history. And they are all connected to specific traditions, specific teachers and lineages<sup>36</sup>. The debates that go on are linked to debates extending through time and space, the past intertwines with present and future concerns. Every group has to make choices regarding how the group is to operate, and what its priorities as an organization should be. For instance, at Karma Tashi Ling the dichotomy debate surfaced when the town center was to be established. Since the town center would be visited by a lot of people that were strangers to Buddhism, it was argued that it not be made too exotic, which might scare people away, and/or create misunderstandings. Also, the courses arranged at KTLBS were characterized by a gradual introduction to practices and teachings. Certain practices might be perceived as too exotic to a beginner. So to participate, you had to have attended former courses, ensuring a basic understanding of Buddhism.

The Dharma Group did not arrange advancing courses like KTLBS did. Newcomers and people that had practiced for years were usually together. This was partly due to the small size of the group. But it was also part of a conscious philosophy. The Zen tradition of The Dharma Group has an emphasis on sitting (sitting meditation). This makes it easier for newcomers and experienced learners to practice together. The wide variety of meditational practices at KTLBS demands teaching to a greater extent, reflected by the advancing courses. The courses teach a whole variety of meditational techniques, along with the ideas behind these techniques. It is seen as important that people understand what they are doing, so that the practice they engage in is not reduced to merely something exotic, or misunderstood as being about magic - hence the advancing courses. But because of this advancement it may also be more difficult for newcomers and experienced learners to practice together, at least during certain meditational practices. Again, these distinctions are not clear-cut. Even the Dharma Group started to arrange introductory courses, but not as elaborate as those of KTLBS. This, however, was done to teach newcomers the pragmatic basics of sitting as a bodily technique.

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<sup>36</sup> The teachers at the international centers would in general have connections with several groups in different countries, which they visited and taught on a regular basis. The connection in Norway was usually just one of many. A lot of the seekers I met at the groups would visit the international centers. Some would get increasingly involved, and a few would commit and become monks or nuns within a specific lineage of Buddhism. A couple of them had engaged to the extent of becoming authorized teachers themselves.

The basic philosophy of the Dharma Group and KTLBS was at one level the same. The aspects of Buddhism that I extracted in chapter one I recognized from both groups. But some aspects differed, some procedures and surrounding features. People at KTLBS sat scattered and randomly around in the room, facing the teacher and the altar; the people at the Dharma Group sat in a square, facing the wall. The Dharma Group would also start their meditations by lying down, feet towards the wall, while the person leading the meditation gave soft instructions for exercises in relaxation and body awareness. These specific ways of practicing bodily techniques had different spatial requirements. The Dharma Group could not rent the town center from KTLBS, because the room was shaped in such a way that it was physically impossible for the participants to lay down in the required square. Furthermore, the emphasis on simplicity among the Dharma participants collided with the bright colors (basically red) at the Paramita town center. Even though the town center had toned down what might be conceived of as exotic features (compared to the retreat center at Ski or the Gumpa at KTL), the Buddha figure and decorations were still overwhelming compared to the tiny, white Buddha statue and tea candles used at the meditations at the Dharma Group.

The distinction between these different ways of relating to tradition manifested physically as well, differences that I found striking at first glance; smell, sound, color, movements. My first impression at KTL had been an encounter with smells of bodies and incense, colorful surroundings and loads of golden Buddhas. On my first encounter with the Dharma Group I entered a clean, light room with wooden floors, a tiny table made into a very discreet altar with a small white Buddha statue and tea candles. It might just as well have been a table in a private home. The rooms differed in shape and color and smell, and the ways that the meditations proceeded differed – positions, movements and instructions, conjured up very different atmospheres.

### **6.1.2 “Preserving the essence”: informants speaking**

*“Buddhism adapts to the culture it enters. But these are processes that take years. To adapt things you have to know what you are doing, what to change and how.”*

*“I think that as Buddhism evolves, as it goes from one country to another, it is adjusted. If the evolution of Buddhism happens more or less spontaneously, without too much deliberate action, that is the best thing. If you put too much effort into*

*making changes, like “oh, we don’t like the shape of the Buddha that is invented in India or Tibet” and try to create another, I think the effort becomes a little questionable. Maybe in some ways sectarian. When Buddhism went from India to Tibet, Tibetan people didn’t try to create a Buddha statue that looks like Tibetans. But when the Tibetan men or women made statues, finally that person will end up making something that resembles their own country, their own features. That is how it is. When you look at a Buddha statue that is made in China, it looks like a Chinese. You even have old statues of Buddha in China with a beard, a long beard. It happens slowly, not by someone putting extra effort in doing that. It just evolves as time passes. That will also happen in the West, it will slowly adjust”.*

*“To present Buddhism in a proper way in Norwegian one has to build up proper conceptual tools. It is of no use just looking up the dictionary, finding a translation. And most books that I have seen do precisely that. They don’t understand what is in the concepts; they just translate it word by word from another language. And you just cannot present Buddhism that way. They don’t know what the concepts mean, they don’t know the context of and the interconnection between the concepts, the translation of the different terms have to harmonize with each other, they have to address the same reality, not just point in all kinds of different directions. I have yet to see anybody who has managed to do that.*

*In English you have a terminology that makes it more mechanical to write, one can just use the standard expressions. But it is dangerous, as you can use it without understanding it. Some of the best I have read is early stuff written by Asians, peaceful Japanese monks who have sufficient knowledge of English, and then they have fought to use their own expressions to communicate, not just the standard English vocabulary. And they manage to get through the essence much better. The thing about language is very important.”*

What follows is a conversation between some people central to the Buddhist groups I visited:

*-“Thich Nhat Hahn [teacher at the Dharma Group] tries to make the content accessible to the people in the countries where it is practiced. I asked him if I should get ordained [to become a monk]. He became quiet for a while, and then he said, you have to try to make a Norwegian Buddhism. And that is true. Practicing Buddhism is not just taking over another country’s cultural package. Then it just becomes exotic intellectual tourism. Nothing else. At least that is what I think.”*



-“Well, actually, it is sort of an intellectual game translating it into Norwegian and trying to give it a Norwegian form, too....”

-“Certainly, but what I mean is, that what I find valuable is what you can use in your own personal life. So it is right to make it into part of your everyday life. And that it is Norwegian, because we are Norwegians.”

-“It’s an interesting theme. At the time of the Buddha, the Buddha refused the monks to recite the teachings in meters, like one did in India, rhymes and stuff. They asked if they could translate the teachings to Sanskrit, which was considered more cultivated at that time. The Buddha refused, and what did he say?”

-“That the teachings should be recited and delivered in one’s own language...”

-“And THAT has been the bone of contention ever since! Because, what does “in one’s own language” mean? Does it mean the language of the Buddha? Or does it mean the language of each and every person? This is unclear in Pali. It can actually mean both. Both are grammatically correct. So this is a delightful ambiguous statement, what the heck did he mean! It was certainly not Sanskrit. So you can throw all the Mahayana scriptures overboard, because they are in Sanskrit...” (laughs with a twinkle in his eyes)

## 6.2 The emphasis on sameness

I have been reflecting briefly upon *differences* between the groups. In doing so, I find myself a bit out of sync with the people I met while doing fieldwork. Talking to people about the differences between the different groups was not easy. In general there was an overwhelming emphasis on *similarity*, not difference. By similarity I mean a relativism where any kind of hierarchical thinking regarding people’s beliefs and practices should be avoided, and not only that – the differences were considered merely superficial manifestations of a basic common denominator. I was told by many, that whether you pray to God, Allah or meditate doesn’t matter, at a deeper level you are working your way towards enlightenment. The Dalai Lama

is a prototype in this regard: he does not tell people to become Buddhists, he encourages people to explore their own religious traditions first and foremost, and to use their own traditions to work their way towards enlightenment<sup>37</sup>. Illustrative of this attitude is the saying I heard on several occasions, that if two academics agree, one of them is not an academic, but if two enlightened people disagree, one of them is not enlightened. I was given an explanation by Lama Changchub at KTL, he said that if you visualize a circle, and truth as being in the center, then we are all moving towards this truth, just from different angles. I was told that being enlightened is being at a point where you see through all the superficialities, down to the core, the ultimate reality, which cannot be debated. This is also an experience that was presented as impossible to put into words, as being enlightened is per definition explained as moving beyond language, concepts and categories.

The following quotes are illustrative of how the issue of difference was elaborated upon by many of my informants. They do so by integrating it into a context that emphasizes oneness:

*“There are many different traditions. I would say it is an acknowledgement of the fact that people are different. That what fits me does not necessarily fit you. Globally one can say that there has been very little antagonism between the different traditions. There has been some trouble, and there are some new religious groups in Japan that call themselves Buddhist, but that are pretty militant, that is my impression. And yet, if you look at the big schools and traditions, I would say that there is a basic understanding there of everybody being different, and that we have different paths. Somebody has a headache, and others have athlete’s foot, so we don’t use the same remedy. And yet, we all want to be healed and healthy. So we use different remedies. That’s why there are different schools, different approaches. Attending intense Zen-retreats suits some people, wearing the same clothes and they feel that’s the right thing to do. Others do prostrations and guryoga, and those things. And they find that this is their path. We are different, simply. And that’s the great thing about Buddhism”.*

*“Different things appeal to different people, and I think that is ok. There is a method for everyone.”*

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<sup>37</sup> I base this upon what I have heard the Dalai Lama say himself. I have been present when he has visited Norway on a few occasions, and I was also among the listeners when the Dalai Lama spoke in Central Park, Manhattan, in 1999.

Are different people attracted to different groups? I asked this question during a conversation with three people central to the Buddhist groups I visited in Norway. One of them answers:

*“That is a good question. If you like colors, forms, sounds and symbols you might feel more at home at KTL than here or in a Zen room.”*

Another informant continues:

*“I have also wondered why some groups are preferred by women, and others by men. I cannot find any answers. It might have to do with the social environment as well as the tradition. I have a feeling that Zen is pretty masculine here in the West. But in Dharma Sah there are a lot of women’s groups.”*

One of the men in the group I am talking to mumbles something about “women being at a lower stage...” and I address him in a playful, angry manner: what did you say? One of the others says, *“Oh, he just said something about there being a lot of enlightened women in Buddhism!”*

In a conversation with a representative of yet another group, I ask, what makes people choose one tradition over another? He answers:

*“I don’t know. Maybe it depends on whom you have met, what you have read, what you are attracted to. How do you fall in love?” (laughs)*

Attending the meditations at the Dharma-group revealed a practice that emphasized sitting-meditation and breathing. The elaborate teaching and rituals that characterized many of the gatherings at KTLBS were not to be found. Also here, when asking about these differences, I was explained that whatever differences might appear, the phenomena were *“the same at a deeper level”*. One of my informants, a teacher, put it this way:

*“It is easy to get lost, to think that Tibetan Buddhism is very ritualistic. And indeed it is. However, the highest form of meditation in Tibetan Buddhism is called “non-meditation”. Non-distraction. Yet at the same time non-contriving and natural. There is no longer any difference between formal meditation and everyday meditation. The mind is totally open. If a thought appears, it appears. The secret is; that if you do nothing about your thoughts, they dissolve by themselves. And that is when life becomes easy. All worries and all sorrow and aggression, hatred, frustration and suffering starts by hanging on to thoughts. Thoughts at several levels, deeper, like emotions, you feel them in your body, it tightens up here and there, even more subtle than you can notice.”*

This informant, too, reports that he perceives differences. But he reveals an understanding of the differences as merely superficial.

Another teacher tells me that

*“The essence is wrapped up, you know. When Tibetan Buddhism is presented to Westerners, it is wrapped in Tibetan culture. The essence of Buddhism is very adaptable. In Norway you can wrap it in Norwegian culture. Like the Buddha said himself, the Buddha’s rules and regulations can be adapted from country to country, from culture to culture. The rules and regulations for monks and nuns that we have made in India were made in accordance with the Indian environment. What was needed there. Adjustments can be made. But the essence has to be retained”.*

Adjustments can be made, but the essence must be retained, he says. I asked him to elaborate more on what the essence is. He pauses for a brief moment, and continues:

*“Essence of Buddhism. I would say understanding the selflessness, emptiness, these two things are very important. Actually, they are not two things, they are one thing; it is about understanding the organic unity of everything, the interdependent origins, or interdependent existence, the interconnectedness and organic unity of everything. Organic unity, selflessness, or emptiness, or interconnectedness. They are the same thing. They have the same meaning. As far as reality is concerned, as far as the ultimate reality is concerned, there is no separate self or independent self which is capable of sustaining itself.”*

As I kept talking to more and more people, I started to recognize the understanding of an essence as a pattern. So I followed it up as a theme when conducting my background conversations, asking these informants to elaborate on what this essence constitutes. One of the teachers points out the essence of Buddhism as follows:

*“That phenomena arise in your mind. Recognizing the nature of your mind, that is what Buddhism teaches. That is the essence. The teachings are about how to wake up. Buddhism is the teaching about waking up.”*

Another says the following on the issue of essence of Buddhism:

*“First of all it is a way of living, which enables you to develop as a human being, develop your relationships with other people, other sentient beings. It is a method that enables emancipation. The element of freedom is very central. Any true Buddhist tradition must have a taste of freedom. According to the Buddha. If a tradition does not, one should start asking questions. If it tastes of delimitation and*

*imprisonment... It has to do with freedom. And we are talking about freedom from desire, hatred etc., that's what you are working towards. To me it is a sense of being free to really live, to exist in the moment; love of life and of knowledge. That's what it is all about. To accomplish this, a multitude of methods have evolved over a period of 2500 years. Buddhism has a very simple way of depicting this with a good balance between ethics, meditation and wisdom. A Buddhist, Buddha does not disappear into some kind of other room. He is in the world, living in the world. Ethics make you able to act in the world. Wisdom is asking questions regarding how you look at the world and understand the world. It is a way of becoming wise. Meditation is partly a method of working directly with your mind, and it is a very good means of linking the outer and the inner worlds."*

A third maintains that

*"The point is learning to see for yourself. Not to learn new understandings, but to understand for yourself."*

A fourth emphasizes that

*"Being good to others constitutes the basis. But understanding your own mind is the essence. Buddhism is scientific: See for yourself! You don't have to believe in anything. That comes along the way, as you understand what it is. But you have a belief in the possibilities of human beings to change, in a positive direction, develop yourself as a human being.. Buddhism is not religion, the Dalai Lama calls it "science of the mind"."*

A fifth declares that

*"You cannot describe reality, it has to be experienced. Some of the essence in Buddhism is; don't believe a bloody word of what I am saying! Feel for yourself how things are! [ ] The core point is duality/non-duality. It is very difficult. The moment you see that the split between subject and object is an illusion, then the subject disappears, which means I have no existence anymore. I have never existed. But I have been clinging to the illusion of my existence as something essential. The moment I realize that I don't exist in an essential sense, only in a relational sense, there is no essence that is me, that's when anxiety kicks in. Then you really... - the sweat pours, the tears are running... If you can see this without being scared as hell, then you are a great Bodhisattva."*

A sixth elaborates as follows:

*"The most central thing is that we, unlike a stone, have a mind, an aspect of us we can call awareness, consciousness, presence or being-in-the-present, not like a*

*dead thing but as something awake. This mind is where things come out and things come in. That is the most central aspect of being a human being. Trying to be a person who is awake and present, that is a potential we have. Awareness is something I will say is central in Buddhism, together with compassion, because we live with other sentient beings, and we all have this in common, that we want a good life. I do, you do, fish do. It is our ability to grasp that others are like us. The aspect of awareness and love is the essence of Buddhism.*

*Then you have the things that are more connected to the aspects of the teachings. To bring about a change in your state of mind, everything is contingent, which means that everything can change. We are not stuck in “such-ness” for eternity. We are relative, we are complex. Buddhism talks about this, that there is no core of me-ness that is eternal and unchangeable, but we are complex and relative. With the right tools we can bring about change. People can become the most terrible devils in certain situations, something happens to them, and the opposite is also possible, to bring forth the basic goodness and awareness that we all have a spark of. Change is possible. And the change Buddhism talks about, is a change for the better, a change that is good for us.”*

Number seven says that

*“A central thing about Buddhism is that you don’t have to believe in anything, you don’t need faith or cling to any dogma. Buddhism has certain postulates that one relates to, but one should not acquire them until you have realized them for yourself. That is an attitude I stick to; if there are things in Buddhism I don’t understand, well, then I merely leave it on the shelf. You don’t need to take the whole package, swallow camels and defend it... one can take one step at a time. [ ] Actually the Kalama sutra<sup>38</sup> warns against acquiring a belief or understanding just because it is tradition, or written in old texts, or because a teacher is good at arguing for something. It is only when you see for yourself that this, whatever it is, leads to something good, then you acquire it. Otherwise, leave it be.”*

Number eight says

*“There may be different schools and traditions, but there is a lot one agrees upon. The essence of the great traditions is non-sectarian. Sectarianism may be*

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<sup>38</sup> “Rely not on the teacher/person, but on the teaching. Rely not on the words of the teaching, but on the spirit of the words. Rely not on theory, but on experience. Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. Do not believe anything because it is spoken and rumoured by many. Do not believe in anything because it is written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and the benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it”. (The Buddha in “the Kalama Sutra”, <http://www.alc.entia.net/kalama.htm>Internet , last accessed 2007-11-16)

*found among laymen and the newly saved, to put it that way. The enthusiasm, right, “we have found The Way...” But not when encountering great teachers, they reflect the attitude of the Buddha.”*

The emphasis on ‘same-ness’ I have pointed out here could also be found when people elaborated on the existence of a wide variety of meditational practices, as in the conversation below:

*-“People do the same thing, but in different ways!”*

*-“There are different kinds of meditation within Theravada, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. There are many ways of exercising, but it is all exercise, and it works in a healthy direction. Unless you overdo it and get sports damage or Meditational damage... he he he.... It is possible...”*

*-“It has happened.”*

*-“Yes, it has happened.”*

But being good at swimming is not the same as being good at skiing? I ask.

*“No, but both may be good for your heart, it goes deeper down than the superficial. I also think that the different directions have a healthy effect on your mind, like sports are good for the body.”*

From my experience from the Rinzai Zen center, I had given thought to the strictness of the meditational practice there. With my bad arm I had to leave the premises. So I had been thinking, what about people with disabilities<sup>39</sup>? Or pregnant women, for that matter? When a meditational practice is very strict, it must have implications for who the group can include, what kind of ‘community’ it can constitute? I mentioned this in a conversation with the same

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<sup>39</sup>By disabilities I had initially thought about physical issues, like a bad back making sitting still in certain positions impossible. The answer I got revolved around problems of a mental character. From my own experience from meditational gatherings, I can guess that a reason why is that people with physical disabilities would not be able to get to a meditational gathering in the first place, whereas people with so-called mental problems could come, and thus become a visible phenomenon to the other people present. I had met a couple of people dropping by KTL who had not been able to comply with the practice, not being able to sit still or be quiet. A woman had once stood up and turned her back to the teacher, and pulled her skirts up before leaving, in the middle of a meditation. When things like that happen, it is inevitable that people become very much aware of the event. Due to this experience, it does not surprise me that the answer I got revolved around what was referred to as mentally challenged people, not physical disability. At the time of the conversation, however, I didn’t notice that the answer strayed from my question. That is why I did not follow it up with additional questions. The reason why is that my question was asked during a group conversation. When the person I quoted had finished his answer, it started a dialogue that I listened to as such, without interrupting. When this dialogue was finished, I no longer remembered the question I had initially asked. The dialogue turned out very illuminating to the issue of difference and sameness.

informants quoted above. They point out that indeed, questions pertaining to inclusion-exclusion constitute an issue:

*“This is an issue at many retreat-places and convents, whether this is supposed to be a shelter for spiritual elites, or to which degree it should be a psychological rehabilitation center... Some times tough meditational regimes are not the right medicine if you have problems. Even people who are healthy may have a hard time. If in addition you happen to be confused... I believe that trying to be quiet and observe a mind you are not acquainted with may make bad worse.”*

*-“Actually, it is not in line with the early Buddhist traditions to have a common meditation. If you read the Suttimaka you clearly see that if a person is to have an object of meditation, your Meditational teacher should make an evaluation, get an idea of your character, and adjust the place you meditate, the food, everything adjusted to the individual. So doing things in a flock is not in line with original Buddhism. It is supposed to be individually adjusted. If you are very picky, you need an ugly place to meditate. If you are a hateful, angry type, you need a beautiful place and good food. It is about working against your tendencies, and to meditate on subjects that your meditational teacher thinks is best suited for your character.”*

*-“You cannot take one medicine for each and every disease. Modern retreats are practical, but...”*

*-“In the convents in Sri Lanka, they give you a theme; they try to use different tools as good as they can. If you are lucky enough to find a competent master, he takes care of you individually. After having lived in a convent you understand what temperament and mental impurities predominate in your mind. You engage in certain forms of meditation, you evaluate the effect along the way, and adjust your course accordingly. You might have the need to get rid of extreme, sensual desire in the beginning, and when it is gone, you try to shape your mind so that it gets clearer and achieves insight.”*

*-“It is not easy. I was just working with translations. There was a monk at the time of the Buddha who came and got a theme for meditation. He went into the forest, and meditated and meditated. And everything went just wrong. Then the Buddha came and talked to him. And monk said; things are not going well. The Buddha gave*



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*him another theme to work with, which he did. Not until the third attempt did the Buddha make the right evaluations. Then things went just fine. Even the Buddha had his problems...”*

In this dialogue as well as in other conversations, difference and sameness are presented as aspects of each other: To reach the same goal of becoming healed and healthy, people need different practices, what was referred to as different medicine, because people are different. Even though the way people would respond when I approached issues relating to difference would vary, the emphasis on similarity formed a clear pattern. Sometimes I felt quite silly for asking about matters relating to differences, because I revealed that I was not able to see through what was generally conceived of as superficial differences, down to what was considered as really mattering. Well familiar with certain forefathers of anthropology, being desperate that their informants did not have time to talk to them about interesting myths because they were so busy doing potlatch, I tried to adjust, and quit banging my head at the issue of difference. Yet, when not bringing up the subject of differences, the subject kept popping up without my help. Not only did I in my much unenlightened state perceive differences, but comparisons occurred, and differences were commented upon – by my informants themselves. I was told stories about historical events, which also pointed in the direction of differences that had mattered to such an extent that even break-ups and -outs were considered necessary, and not all of these breakups had been on friendly terms. Such breakups could form the basis for a new group. People breaking out could establish themselves within other traditions, finding other teachers.

Certainly, peace and friendliness prevailed. There were differences that indeed did matter, as well as conflicts – as to be expected within any thriving organization or social environment. Anything else I would have found reason for concern. The interesting phenomenon is that these differences existed side by side with a very explicit emphasis on everything as actually the same at a deeper level. The ideals as such formed a clear pattern of explicitly expressed agreement when I talked to people in all the groups, teachers as well as laymen. In fact, the verbal emphasis on similarities was so strong, that without spending time at meditational gatherings, courses and retreats, I would have missed out on many aspects of difference. The verbal emphasis on similarities was so strong that I was in for a surprise when coming to Oslo. My formerly described encounter at the Rinzai Zen center can be said to have been a pretaste in this regard. As time went by, I started piling up empirical material produced by spending time at meditations and courses that further demonstrated how the knowledge

gained from reading and talking turned out to be quite different from the knowledge generated by participating at meditational gatherings. The next chapter will elaborate on some of the themes that arose by way of such participation.

## 7. Revisiting

I ended the former chapter by saying that knowledge gained from reading and talking turned out to be different from the knowledge generated by participating at meditational gatherings. In the beginning of this chapter I will begin by presenting more data-material generated by participation at meditations, courses and retreats. Then I will move on to elaborating on themes derived from the first paragraphs, also drawing upon information derived from conversations with my informants: I followed up these themes when conducting narrative interviews.

### 7.1 *Returning to Karma Tashi Ling*

#### 7.1.1 Changes over time

When returning to Karma Tashi Ling to do fieldwork, I found that it had changed quite a bit since the last time I visited. The former Monday meditations no longer existed as such. The meditations had been divided up in classes and courses: now you have to finish the first level to continue to the next. This did something to the stability of participants: Either you decide to join a course from beginning to end, or you don't. Having paid for a course seems to create a commitment different from the more accidental drop-ins characterizing the former Monday meditations. Each course-level introduces new issues, and represents a gradual advancement. What is conceived of as more exotic-appearing teachings are reserved for the advanced learners. In other words, the teachings have become more formalized, with gradual progression into more advanced meditational practice and teachings. I decided to follow the course for beginners. As a social anthropologist I would have liked to follow the teachings at all levels, but this could not be done. For one, some of the courses were held on the same day. And furthermore, I had to finish one course to attend the course at the next level. There was no way I could engage in fieldwork for as long as that required. Since one of my goals was getting to know people enough to ask them to become informants, I also figured that stability was important. It was better to be a regular visitor at one course, than just popping in at many courses. As courses implied progression, it would also have been hard for me to follow the teachings if I had not come on a regular basis.

KTLBS had also expanded since I last visited. As well as having more members, it now had a total of three different places at its disposal. I learnt that in 1998 KTLBS bought several acres of forest further east at Ski, and established Karma Shedrup Ling retreat center, or KSL. Their web page informs us that it means the Buddha place for theory and practicing<sup>40</sup>. I had yet to experience KSL when returning to KTL, but I had seen pictures of it on the Internet. KSL consists of a main house, a large notched log construction, surrounded by several tiny huts among the trees. The main building has a large, golden Buddha statue in it. Like the floors in the formerly described Gumpa, the floors here are covered with carpets. In the corners there are pillows and carpets. The main difference between the main building and the Gumpa was the size, as well as the impressiveness of the notched log walls and ceiling. KSL is where summer courses are arranged, and later I would attend some of these summer courses. Karma Shedrup Ling is also a place where people may come and do retreat on an individual basis, and sometimes other Buddhist groups will rent the place for courses etc. One of the more central people in KTLBS, explains some of the changes that have taken place as follows:

*“This course activity, things have been made a bit more structured. People are gathered in study groups. It has been a positive development. There is more planning and structure now. There has been some expansion and buying of property. To begin with we merely rented the place from the municipality of Oslo. Then the property was announced for sale, about 70-80 mål [17-20 acres]. There was a round of bidding, and somebody else bought it. Who later on regretted it; he did not know what to do with it anyway. So there was a new round of bidding, and now it is ours. It has meant a lot to us having a proper place to arrange courses. It was not that ok to use KTL anymore; earlier we had the whole valley at our disposal, now there is a road, and we cannot do things like we used to. That’s why we acquired KSL. This, however, means that we have a bit of property and debt, and quite a bit to administer, and quite a bit of people involved, a whole organization. It is too great a task for people with little time. You have to cut down on something, not to wear out. That is the paradox of a place like this; the ones who join in, are the ones who get the least time to meditate, and the most work... You don’t get paid to work here, so you need a regular job, too. There has to be a balance, people need to be able to practice and get an opportunity to go in depth personally. The last year we have made a few changes regarding people on the board. So that people can get some time off. It should not be like this, that one person*

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<sup>40</sup> KTLBS homepage, author unknown, <http://www.tibetansk-buddhisme.no/>, last accessed 2007-10-30

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*has to stand there constantly, or else everything falls down. It is a good feeling to see that there are competent people who can assume responsibilities.”*

I also learnt that KTLBS had rented a place in the center of Oslo with a store upstairs, called “*Buddha bok og bilde*”, which translates into “Buddha books and pictures”, selling Buddhist literature and Buddhist figures, incense, pictures etc. Downstairs there is a place for meditation, named “the Paramita meditation center”, with an altar and pillows for meditation. This is where the equivalent of the former Monday meditations is held today. I was told that the existence of a city center is intended to be an opening towards the public, making it easier for people to get in touch. And indeed, its location in the center of Oslo as well as the store does make it easier for many people to pop in, to take a look at literature and ask questions. It also makes it easier for many people to attend the courses that are arranged, they no longer have to travel for hours to get there. A couple of people I talked to at KTL voiced the opinion that this kind of location was of no importance: if coming to meditations was important enough for people, they would come anyway, if a person was supposed to come, s/he would come. However, a more pragmatic outlook on things (pragmatic from my perspective) dominated, and was reflected in the decision making – a city center would be useful. And, it should be designed to be what was called “*neutral*”, meaning that traits that are conceived of as too exotic are toned down to a minimum. I am explained that as the man in the street does not know about the symbolism of colors and images, it may just divert focus away from what this is really about. The general opinion is that people should know a little more about Buddhism before having such symbolism presented. Symbolism that is not understood might create misunderstandings, was the general opinion expressed.

### **7.1.2 Taking a dive**

I had initially considered doing retreat at KSL, the retreat center at Ski. But when starting my fieldwork it was wintertime, and the little huts at KSL have no water for showering inside and it is freezing cold. (They have no showers in the summertime either, but an outdoor shower is built from a platform and with plastic coverings. Here you can pour buckets of water over yourself). I figured that being at KTL was a more convenient solution, also in the sense that it positioned me closer to the city, which meant that I could visit the meditations and activities going on in the city center, as well as visit the other Buddhist groups. KSL is not a place for permanent living, though a couple of people live close by, supervising the place. Neither does KTL have any permanent residents, apart from Lama Changchub, the Tibetan monk who has

his little apartment, or rather small studio or room, in the Gumpa, and two cats and a woman living in the main house, who takes care of the place and welcomes visitors. From time to time one or two other people may be staying at KTL, as was the case when I arrived to do fieldwork, but the time of communal living passed with the seventies. In fact, there would seem to be some concern that KTL should not function as a private residence. I was told that if it gave the impression of being a private home, it could have an excluding effect on visitors.

By starting out doing retreat, I was ‘taking a dive’, a metaphor inspired by a story told by Lama Changchub. He told about a man who had studied oceanology all his life. One day he ended up on a sinking ship. He realized that he had wasted his whole life: his theoretical knowledge about water could not help him, it did him no good, because he could not swim. The story reveals an emphasis on non-verbal knowledge that I was to encounter over and over again, when talking to people as well as by reading books about Buddhism. In one of the booklets used in the course for beginners at KTL, it is expressed like this: “Words are not the highest reality, neither is what can be expressed in words. Why? Because the highest reality is an experience beyond words” (1995:62). Among the people I met during fieldwork, the understanding of a reality beyond words was central, which was no surprise to me, as meditation is a practice intended to cultivate the non discursive aspects of being. One of my informants expressed it this way:

*“A basic obstacle is dogma. That you don’t see the illusory in verbal expression, that you think truth can reside in a verbal formulation”.*

Doing retreat at KTL is not an ordinary occurrence, and people showed a lot of flexibility and helpfulness by making this possible. My two week retreat at KTL was guided by the Norwegian teacher, Roar Vestre. This entailed meeting a few times a week. We would talk, and he would give me advice on how to proceed, and I could ask questions and get feedback regarding my experience. I am very grateful for him taking the time to do so. The activities in the Buddhist groups I encountered are not commercial enterprises: the work that is done at KTLBS as well as the Dharma-group is based upon people volunteering to do so, in addition to their ordinary jobs. There is no economic compensation. This meant that the time Roar Vestre used talking to me was his sparetime, as goes for my other informants as well. I truly acknowledge the generosity people showed by doing so.

My retreat was supposed to consist of two hours of meditation before breakfast, that is, from six to eight o’clock. Then I had breakfast in the kitchen at KTL from eight to nine, followed

by a two-hour-walk, practicing awareness. Afterwards I read Buddhist literature and meditated again. I alternated between meditating in my room, in front of a little altar there, and in the formerly described Gumpa. There had been a fire in the Gumpa a couple of years earlier, so the altar and a lot of the pictures on the walls had been rebuilt since I last visited. Otherwise it looked just the same. I also tried to help out with some everyday chores at the center when possible, labeling books for the library, sorting cards and incense for the store at the town center, trying to do my share of cleaning etc. I wasn't in any kind of seclusion. The point of meditation, as I was explained, is rather practicing awareness in everyday chores, to bring a meditational state of being into your daily life. I met and conversed with the people who came to the center. We would talk about meditation, Buddhism and philosophy as well as the different Buddhist groups and traditions, in addition to ordinary smalltalk about the little events of everyday life. From these conversations I got some clues regarding how to proceed, who I should talk to, about what, and how things worked.

After my two week of retreat I started out having conversations with the people listed as contact persons in the different groups organized in the Buddhist Society, following up the conversations with visiting and participating in their meditations. Through doing so, I got to know the people that I spent the last six months of fieldwork talking with, about seeking in general.

### **7.1.3 Glimpses from a retreat**

For me, getting up before six is hard. After a shower and a cup of coffee I meditated in my room. Or rather, I tried to. Ten minutes would pass, and I would pass out. I would wake up an hour later, feeling ashamed. This happened again and again. I went for walks every day. I walked slowly and tried to practice awareness, as Roar Vestre had instructed me to do. At breakfast we talked about different kinds of meditations, and we talked about food. Food is an issue when eating. Here, however, the focus on food was very often, and intensely so, interlinked with questions of health, ethics and morals. Should one be a vegetarian, for instance, and what does food do to your body? The people staying at KTL at the time were not vegetarians. The question of vegetarianism was yet a concern. It seemed like we were all considering, or well on our way to reducing our consumption of meat. Organically grown food and different kinds of alternative medicines were often thematized. I learnt that some kinds of food cannot be combined with homeopathic medicine, and that some herbs should be used in gender-specific ways. I would frequently hear talk about different kinds of diets, not

get-slim diets, but different kinds of what I will term ‘get-purified-and-healthy’ diets. Alternative medicine was also a recurring theme:

One of the girls living at KTL at the time was a practitioner of so called Cranio-Sacral-Therapy. This practice was explained as being about the practitioner gently touching the client, who is lying down, fully clothed. The light touch is supposed to be taken up in the cranium, the sacrum or other parts of the body. I had a session with her, trying it out. I met a woman who was into Feng-Shui. I was explained that it has to do with furnishing and organizing your surroundings, based on the idea that clutter collects stagnant energy, which again keeps you stuck in undesirable life patterns. Clutter was explained as a manifestation of negative inner states, and working on the organization of your surroundings is working on your own mind. Watching the news on TV (yes, there is a TV at KTL now) the theme being lotto, brought out a conversation about Karma. Winning in the lottery makes you acquire a lot of Karmatic debt, one of my fellow TV-watchers told me, because you get money that others have given. At the time there was a story in the news about a blind codfish that had been caught by a fisherman and let out again, only to be caught by the same fisherman, over and over again. Actually forty times. Then the fish was sent to Atlanterhavsparken in Ålesund, to get a better life there. TV2 arranged a name competition, and the fish was named Balder. The fish became a media phenomenon. This story was also commented upon by my fellow TV-watchers: *“They must have some kind of karmic relationship”* a woman said.

Two cats lived on the premises, a mother and a daughter. The mother cat, a little grey female, came into my room every evening and slept in my bed. The girl working with Cranio-Sacral-Therapy and I talked about having animals. She told me she loved animals. And that she would like to have animals of her own one day. But she wanted animals that *“come to her”*, she says. An animal that she was *“supposed to have”*. This would not be the last time I heard this kind of reflection. As a matter of fact, I had already heard it a year before, talking with a girl that I had met at a summer course at KSL, before I formally started fieldwork. We were talking in her apartment, and a large, beautiful golden cat sat beside me on the couch. She had been planning on having another animal, but then this cat just *“came to her”*, she said. First I thought she meant that the cat had appeared at her doorstep, as cats are known to do on occasion. But no, she was talking about circumstances in general that led this cat to become hers. She was referring to events that drove her in a certain direction, as if a path unfolded in front of her. She spoke about these events as if her task had merely been one of walking the path. Two years later I would experience a similar thing, ending up with three cats instead of



the dog I had planned on having. I experienced how this could be conceptualized as the cats ‘just coming to me’. Circumstances just seemed to pile up in that direction. Accepting the cats could be understood as going with the flow, it was the opposite of fighting what life brought me, but also a conscious choice and voluntary act on my behalf.

What is meant by the animals “*just coming to you*” or “*the path*” as unfolding in front of you, does not seem to have anything to do with abandoning the ability to choose, or the putting aside of all one’s own wishes. It rather seems to be about finding a middle way, pushing gently, maybe even firmly, but not banging your head in the wall, trying out things, but not pursuing them recklessly. It seems to be about cultivating an awareness of open doors and possibilities that do exist, instead of blindly heading for doors that may be locked and bolted, just because you have a pre-conceived idea of wanting to go just there. I interpret it as being about flexibility, being able to bend and accept as well as trying out things. I see being able to bend as being able to avoid breaking, and I understand Buddhist practice as a training to do just that. Buddhist practice was explained to me as being about non-attachment to ideas, which makes pragmatic adjustment possible. In general, we live in a society where the situations in people’s lives may change fast: moving to different places, getting new jobs and having to adjust to new people as well. I understand the meditational cultivation of non-attachment as a way of *creating a capital of flexibility* in a society where this kind of flexibility can be very useful.

An informant, who is one of the best skateboarders in Norway, compares the practice of Buddhist philosophy to skateboarding:

*“It is actually one and the same thing. I sit and meditate, and I enter the same state of mind while skateboarding”.*

For one, he emphasizes how both skateboarding and meditation imply the necessity of being present in the moment. He explains that you cannot skateboard and ponder events in the past or the future, you have to be intensely aware of the present. Two, (which intertwines with number one), keeping your balance when skateboarding is about steering, *by way of adjusting* your body according to the territory where you are skating. Flexibility is a clue. Animals that “*come to you*” or skateboarding, these are phenomena that can be understood as relating to the world of working as not just an object of our actions, not just a framework within which these actions are performed, but as something that also acts upon you, something you *interact* with.

I made notes constantly during my retreat. I reflected upon the way I become very much aware of my needs when meditating: “I want coffee. I want food”. When meditating, I started to think about the animals I planned on having, and I started planning my future in general. Memories kept popping up as well. Every time I became aware of these processes in my mind, I tried to go back to focusing upon my breath, as I had been instructed. Then I noticed how the yellow walls seemed green when I did not look directly at them. I tried to label my experience. “Yellow”. “Green”. Then my mind rushed into analyzing instead. Why does the yellow seem green? And at what point do they turn from yellow to green, when I move my eyes? My thoughts were like a shadow-world that I inevitably kept disappearing into. I realized how hard it is to just sit and breathe! And I realized how uninteresting the thoughts roaming my mind are. Not only did I find them uninteresting, but they tended to repeat themselves. When I stopped myself from associating, I became aware of how the same thoughts would pop up again and again. I found myself to be a total bore. So much of my inner discourse had the very same point of departure, associations deriving from the very same basic thoughts. What follows may vary a bit, but it is all variations upon the same themes. It strikes me that if these basic themes of mine, these basic sentences of mine changed, every thought that followed would be changed. I would be engaging in radically different lines of association. What implications would such a change have? I will never know. But changing the point of departure of my associations would certainly affect my story about the world, as well as the story about me. At one level I would be a different person, perceiving a different reality.

I realized what a great storyteller I am. Not great in the sense ‘good’, but in the sense ‘engaging in a lot’. Over and over again I caught myself in the process of turning my experience into stories. The stories of my meditational experience: the way I wanted to tell it to Roar Vestre, the way I wanted to tell it in my thesis, the way I wanted to tell it to... My thoughts were stories, stories that always had a direction. It was like I was constantly relating to an invisible audience, someone who listens, and sometimes even argues with me. I provided the arguments myself. I could even get mad at someone for responding in a silly way, even though the response was made up by me. I observed how I, in my mind, got engaged in, and wore myself out on hypothetical events. It was as if I spent a lot of time in a cyber space, a made-up world of happenings and conflicts, dialogue and turmoil. I started visualizing myself as carrying a private cloud around my head, preventing me from seeing what is here and now.

I started having a lot of dreams at night while staying at KTL. In one of them I was in a house that was mine, discovering new, dark rooms in a basement that just kept going deeper and deeper down. And in these rooms I found more and more dusty Buddha statues, of all sizes and shapes, covered with cobwebs. Large, heavy, beautiful golden treasures.

## 7.2 *Concerns in the making*

### 7.2.1 Double binds

In my fieldnotes I made notes to myself regarding patterns that seemed to unfold, as well as what appeared to me as discrepancies, phenomena that make me stop and ponder, maybe even feel frustrated. I think of a frustration as a discovery not yet made, a doorway into learning something about the social reality of which I am part.

Very early on I wrote the following in my field notes: “People emphasize that there are no “dos” and “don’ts” in Buddhism, just advice that I can choose to follow or not. The word “sin” is pointed out as irrelevant, which is contrasted to Christianity by the people I talk to. However, by staying here my mind is constantly being focused on rights and wrongs and consequences of my actions. My *experience* of “dos” and “don’ts”, just by staying here, is persistent. Yet the “dos” and don’ts” are verbally negated by the people that surround me. I have trouble coming to terms with this double bind”. What I referred to as a double bind in my diary would turn out to be a scarlet thread through my whole year of fieldwork. Another apparent contradiction was how much emphasis was put on “*freedom*” in the discourse of people I met. Freedom as in being freed from what was characterized as “*negative thoughts and emotions*”, “*releasing one’s creative potential*” and “*cultivating positive energies*”. Freedom was something that my informants reported trying to achieve primarily by “*working with themselves*”, for instance by way of meditation. Freedom and happiness obviously did not come without hard work. I was a little puzzled that freedom meant so much hard work and discipline.

I also noticed another phenomenon: Each individual emphasized the importance of making one’s own choices, finding your own truths. Yet, I noted when talking to more and more people that they all seemed to be coming up with very similar ‘truths’. Not to mention the fact that everybody expressed very similar ideas of how these ‘individual truths’ were to be found in the first place. To me, the claims being made and the patterns that unfolded looked

like conformity in the disguise of individualism. This observation lends support to Rose's reflections on how choosing implies the use of criteria and values generated in a social context (1999:10-11). Assuming his perspective, the similarities that could manifest themselves in spite of an emphasis on finding your own truths is no paradox, but rather to be expected. From a Critical Realist perspective a very similar explanation can be utilized: assuming that human beings relate to an intransitive dimension, this may also account for the similarities regarding the truths that they come up with. If people probe into the intransitive dimension, positioned in a certain kind of society at a certain time in history, based upon certain related ideas of what kind of reality we are dealing with, and by way of similar bodily techniques, one can assume that the realms of enquiry that are opened up will have certain similarities, generating similar truths.

### 7.2.2 "The strong version" of Karma

A theme I become increasingly concerned about in my diary is the concept of Karma. Before conducting fieldwork, I had never pondered the concept of Karma. I must have had an assumption that Karma was just another word for interconnection as I knew it from the social sciences, an assumption I became aware of because of my surprise at the many different understandings of Karma that I encountered when spending time at meditations and courses, talking to many different people. Some of these ideas seemed compatible with my own understandings, others were not. This plurality in itself constituted an interesting observation.

However, sometimes I heard ideas expressed during fieldwork that shocked me. These were ideas about disease and disability being the result of actions in your former lives. These were ideas about people choosing their own parents before they are born, because you are assumed to know that you need certain experiences – even if this includes physical, mental and sexual abuse. Everything that happens to you is presented as not only the direct result of your own actions, but you are seen as *needing* everything that happens, you are seen as *deserving* everything that happens. By the proponents of this approach, I was literally told that it is up to the individual to make her/his life, health, body and economy exactly the way s/he wants it, as it was presented as a question of thinking the right thoughts and doing the right things. Karma, instead of being the neutral idea of cause and effect that I had understood it to be, was, according to some people, presented as some kind of *justice promoting mechanism*. I will call these specific interpretations of Karma *the strong version*. Not because the understandings were identical, but because these were interpretations with a certain common denominator:

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they made the word *injustice* irrelevant. Injustice cannot exist in a world where only things that are deserved happen. What is more: the world was presented as one where the individual is ultimately *in control* of her/his life: s/he creates it.

At a teaching by a visiting Tibetan teacher a story was told about a man who made his living by raising and slaughtering chicken. He got a child with deformed limbs that actually looked like chicken's feet. This was presented as a result of the father's butchering activities. When this story was told, a woman in the Gumpa protested. The protest was more tearful than angry. She pointed out to the teacher that "*many people will get very sad if you say things like that*", and she continued: "*it is not right, things cannot be like that*". In response the teacher emphasized that the disabled child must also have done something him/herself in a former life to end up in this state: "*Karma is very complex*". This did not seem to provide any comfort for the concerned woman, nor did it for me. The woman did not pursue her protests during the teachings, but afterwards she expressed her sadness to me, when I approached her and quietly said that I thought it was a good thing that she had made these comments. Another episode took place at a different meditational gathering. I had come early, and so had a couple of others. One of them was a woman I had never seen before. While waiting we talked a little. The woman started telling us that many enlightened people were being reborn as Westerners today. Due to this accumulation of people with great insight in the West, the Western societies were to be considered superior to non-Western societies, and we were at the top morally as well as intellectually, she said.

Only two things kept me from leaving the premises: one, I was doing fieldwork, I felt I had a duty to stay. Two, I conceived of the woman as fragile and suffering, which may have been incorrect observations, but it made me feel truly sorry for her. Yet, the state of this person is not the issue. As social beings our voices are not just about our individual (mis)understandings. The ideas we express, no matter how extreme they may be considered, are products of a certain place and time in history. As Bakhtin (1991) says: the very nature of language is dialogical as it links us up to other voices in time as well as space. When working at a psychiatric hospital as a student, I had older colleagues reporting that "*mentally ill people*" were different today, compared to before. When studying psychology, I learnt how "*the same mental illness*" manifested itself differently in different cultures, and how certain historic periods had their own specific psychiatric diseases. When studying social anthropology, I learnt to deconstruct the very phenomenon of mental disease altogether, and direct focus towards the phenomenon of madness through concepts of power and discipline,

mechanisms that include and accept certain voices within a social domain, and the relativity of the normal. Even though not a regular visitor, even though not representative of my informants as such, the woman voicing the superiority of the West applied a logic that built upon many elements that I encountered in general when conducting fieldwork. She interpreted reality by way of concepts like Karma and reincarnation, and based her reasoning upon more generally accepted ideas of the human being as evolving. The moment ideas of spiritual evolution are introduced, this tends to portray people as being at different stages of development, thus introducing the idea of a hierarchy.

Adding to my already growing concerns about the strong version of Karma, I read a New Age magazine, *Alternativt Nettverk*<sup>41</sup>, which was lying on a table at KTL. Here I followed a discussion about religious/spiritual teachers and sexual abuse. This was about spiritual teachers in general, not in relation to Buddhism. In the debate presented, some people argued that ‘you get the teachers you deserve’ and ‘you get the teacher you need’, and concluded that we should not be aggravated by such incidents, nor should we intervene. Then there were people disagreeing, saying that a person who is truly seeking deserves the very best, which is by no means being taken advantage of sexually or otherwise. These people were of the opinion that it was most important to clean up when abuse happened. The very fact that such a thing could be discussed at all, made the hairs on my head stand on end.

In the following paragraphs I will follow up the observations I am pointing out here. Though contested and disputed among my informants, indeed, *because* it was contested and disputed, I need to write about the strong version of Karma. It points to what I see as a field of tension, where issues of difference and similarity are revisited, shedding new light upon the pattern of sameness that otherwise seemed to arise from the stories of my informants.

### **7.2.3 Revisiting the pattern of sameness**

On his own initiative, one of my informant expressed deep concern, telling me that some people voice the opinion that spiritual teachers can be at such an advanced level of understanding that they are beyond our realm of critique. He explained that some people argue that sexual abuse could be a form of advanced teachings, which, he pointed out, can have the effect of dismissing those who criticize the abuse as lacking of insight. This informant also shared elaborate reflections on why this could happen:

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<sup>41</sup> Cato Christensen has written an analysis of *Alternativt Nettverk*. His focus is on “Aborigines on the alternative marked”, and his thesis is also a good introduction to *Alternativt Nettverk* in general (2005).

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*“In Japanese Zen the ethical rules have gotten a very peripheral role, and there is a very strong hierarchy. And in Tibetan Buddhism you find this crazy wisdom, and you have a very strong hierarchy there too. You have people who are beyond the world and beyond ordinary moral rules”.*

The same informant said that different meditational techniques tend to cultivate different modes of being, and introduced a distinction between *concentration* and *awareness*. Whether you cultivated concentration or awareness had implications for the possibility of elaborating on ethical issues, he said. He explained that concentration is cultivated in marshal arts, as well as in quick walking meditation.

*“Concentration means being focused on one point, awareness is a wider focus. You can’t live your everyday life in great concentration, but you can live with awareness. Awareness gives a better opportunity to estimate what is good and what is not”.*

According to the definitions provided by this informant, the meditations practiced at the Dharma group as well as KTLBS can be understood as meditational forms cultivating *awareness*.

By introducing the distinction between concentration and awareness, this informant is introducing an element of *difference*. This is a difference he understands as not merely superficial, but as one that matters, as having potentially serious ethical implications. In other words, he breaks the pattern of repeated claims that *“everything is actually the same at a deeper level”*. He also points out the existence of a *hierarchy*, which also breaks the pattern of sameness, and he discerns potential implications of the hierarchy, as it is understood as rendering some people *“beyond the world and beyond ordinary moral rules”*. The pattern of sameness is broken, as is the pattern of relativism. Indeed, he expressed deep concern about certain ways of thinking and relating to other sentient beings.

Before I move on, I need to point out that I am not aware of any cases of abuse that have taken place in Norway. The people I spoke to reported that there had not been any such incidents in Norway to anybody’s knowledge. On an international level it is a different matter. All the groups I visited in Norway belong to traditions that have their main seats and main teachers elsewhere on the globe. Things that have happened elsewhere can affect Norwegians, and start out debates in the Norwegian groups as well, I was told. On Norwegian ground, though, it does seem plausible to me that this kind of abuse has not taken place, as the Norwegian groups are rather small, there are no convents or monasteries or communities that are

secluded from the rest of society, and even though the people who belong to the groups meet occasionally, they live their lives elsewhere. The teachings are open occasions in general, with many people present. There does not seem to be much room, quite literally, for the kind of abuse that has been addressed on an international level. Some informants also told me about precautions taken, to prevent what was conceived of as corruption or abuse of power. For instance, the leader of the Buddhist Society was very specific about pointing out the following as an important criterion when deciding whether a group could become a member or not:

*“What one does not want, is an organization led by a self-appointed guru, which does not belong to any religious tradition, and lacks democratic forms of control. We are very specific about that.”*

Another informant says the following about the issue of abuse:

*“If there is only one person, there are no checks and balances. One teacher at the top, with nobody to balance it. At KTL and KSL, the teachers I meet always have their own teachers. The Dalai Lama, whom we tend to think of as at the top, has his teachers; there are constant checks and balances. You have a dynamic contact with the others. There is nobody popping up at the top. You have seen such tendencies in Buddhism, and you have seen such tendencies within... Where have you not seen such tendencies...? But there are some dangers inherent there. Again, there are enlightened qualities, but not enlightened persons. So there is a need for a correcting-constant all the time. If the enlightened qualities are there, it cannot get any better. But the person will always be there. You talk about “Nirvana with a residue”. And as long as we are in our bodies, we have remnants of conditions inside us, and it needs checks and balances. The remnants are there on top of the enlightened qualities. It is necessary with others as correctional elements.”*

Allegations of abuse can be found anywhere. It can be found within any group or community, religious or not, at universities as well as within families. Human beings will be human beings. The issue of abuse is not specific to any specific social environment. Neither is denial, which is associated with allegations of abuse in general. What I am pointing out here, is rather the *kind* of dialogue that was reported to follow in the wake of such allegations, what *kind* of arguments that were considered adequate.



## 7.3 One concept, many seeds

### 7.3.1 Karma and political quietism

The same basic concept can carry many different seeds. Its meaning is not fixed, but fluctuating and disputed. Usually I would encounter the concept of reincarnation in contexts that elaborated compassion: the teacher could ask the meditator to contemplate how every person has once been our mother, father, son and daughter, as an exercise in extending the love we feel for the people to whom we are close to total strangers as well. Usually the concept of reincarnation was applied to emphasize that “*we are all of the same essence*”, communicating continuity and sameness, as opposed to hierarchical division. However, the same concept also seemed to hold the potential of building a hierarchical world-view where critique could be silenced, as reported by the informant I started out quoting in the last paragraph.

The strong version of Karma<sup>42</sup> is something the political scientist Michael Parenti (1994) calls an aspect of *political quietism*. He claims that the victimizations of the real world are brushed aside as emphasis is put on how reality is *perceived*, and sees a notion like the strong version of Karma as discouraging engagement with social problems and political realities. Parenti says that from treating what he calls “interior experience” as all-important, it is but a short step to claiming a personalized omnipotence, referring to claims I recognize from my fieldwork: “you *create* your own reality,” or “you *choose* your own reality”. Parenti draws parallels between this kind of self-centeredness and what he calls the hyper-individualism of the free-market society. The individualism of the free-market society is something Dumont (1986) approaches as an ideological construction mystifying holism, veiling the impact of social context as we know it in the social sciences (1986). True, when doing fieldwork, I found a general emphasis on concept of holism among the people I spoke to. But among propounders of the strong version of Karma, the word holism was evoked to elaborate upon connections between “*body and mind*” and the individual in relation to some “*cosmic principle*”. The strong version of Karma did not only ignore the impact of social context, it introduced the individual as in control of her/his reality in ways that are completely incompatible with social scientific ideas of reality. What the propounders of the strong version of Karma kept calling holism appeared to me as a rather extreme version of individualism. Indeed, Prince and Davies observe that holistic notions can be used to defend

<sup>42</sup> Parenti does not use the concept of ‘the strong version of Karma’, which is a concept invented by me, but he addresses the same patterns of reasoning.

individualistic notions (1999:168-9). We seem to be dealing with what Mikaelson calls a combination of “cosmological and individualistic perspectives with the effect of preventing social injustice to be raised as a moral problem” (Mikaelson 2001:109)<sup>43</sup>. Prince and Davies report how certain values and ideas can contribute to justifying certain economic and power relations (1999:168-9). Which is also the very point made by Parenti: the strong version of Karma is just another manifestation of a general glorification of self-reliance that capitalism represents, claiming that in their focus on the self, the yuppie and the yogi are not that far apart (1994). These social scientists represent different disciplines. But what they have in common is that they identify the strong version of Karma as a phenomenon arising from, and lending support to, a certain kind of society with a certain kind of economy.

Indeed, the *understandings* that the strong version of Karma entails I recognize from innumerable other contexts. My claim is that it can be found as a much more general feature of our society today. Good writes about chronic pain, disease and disability in general, and the word Karma is absent in his text. But the pattern of reasoning he points out is the very same as I have identified as the strong version of Karma: He says that in our society we are often told that a strong will can influence the body. An implication of this is that infirmity is often associated with *a lack of individual strength*. Good maintains that this is deeply problematic, especially to the chronically ill, who feel great discomfiture in this ethos. He points out that chronically ill people “are discredited as burdensome, anomalous, and, in some unspoken but definite way, *responsible for their condition*” (1992, my emphasis). I find the same reductionism in so-called holism increasingly promoted in biomedicine, where disease is emphasized as originating in mind, and presented as ultimately a question of will (Eide and Lillestø 1999). Indeed, when I chose to name the pattern I observed ‘the *strong* version of Karma’, it is because I identified yet another resemblance: between this specific way of understanding Karma, and what Sayer addresses as social constructivist ideas in its *strong* form (Sayer 2006). Both are patterns of reasoning with an ontological basis where “the death of the referendum” is a common denominator.

When I encountered a fellow meditator with the idea that chanting ‘money, money’ can make you rich, the phenomenon is not as alien as it might seem at first glance. It is rather as if a

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<sup>43</sup>Mikaelson draws connections between an economy that is increasingly becoming “mysterious” and “impenetrable”, and certain “cosmic speculations”. She says that the introduction of creditcards etc. has contributed to an abstraction of economy: “Money is increasingly becoming an invisible stream of energy in the world, corresponding more and more with the New Age energy concept, and thus perhaps indirectly supporting a New Age vision of the universe” (Mikaelson 2001:108). Her argument is that when money is perceived as an energy flow of the universe, appearing as accessible in abundance, it is understood as something up to the individual reach for. Social class and economic structures of societies are ignored in such a cosmology, she says.

magnifying glass has been put on a much more generally accepted and widespread tendency. Even the thesis of redescription is part of this pattern, interlinked with the shift in the social sciences from representational to ontological narrativity, the understanding of narrative as an ontological condition of social life. These phenomena have a common denominator: *the active component of human beings as creators of their own destiny and shapers of their social environment is emphasized*. In academia it finds expressions like “autobiography produces life rather than the other way around” (Harpam in Olney 1988:42, de Man 1979). Oh, the power of mind... If beliefs in transformation and the creative potential of Man defines New Age, then we are all somehow part of it. Such beliefs are found in all walks of our society. Not undisputed, but as quite protruding perspectives<sup>44</sup>. When I voice concern about the strong version of Karma, it is not concern about any specific social environment. It is a concern about a much more general ethos.

When thinking about and comprehending the reality in which we are situated, we make use of metaphors and models of understanding. Some models constitute key elements to a greater extent than others. One such key element is the root metaphor. A root metaphor is essentially analytic: it helps us think about “how it all hangs together” (Ortner 1973), and provides great conceptual elaborating power. According to Ortner, it establishes certain basic views of the world, through which the root metaphor implicitly suggests certain valid and effective ways of acting upon the world. Root metaphors contribute to the formulation of basic orientations and imply certain modes of action, modes of action that Ortner refers to as “key scenarios”. These are scenarios that embody and rest upon certain assumptions about the nature of this reality. Key scenarios embody the root metaphors. I have pointed out the basic building stone of the strong version of Karma as a general feature in our society: the emphasis on the active component of human beings as creators of their own reality. This is a basic idea that is not to be found within any neat boundaries, it manifests in subtle and not so subtle networks of ideas, possessing the characteristics of the Deleuzian rhizome (1988). The rhizome is an underground, horizontal root of a plant that sends out more roots and shoots from its nodes,

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<sup>44</sup> What is more, these are not just ideas: they have consequences for the lives of people on a very concrete level. In arenas where such beliefs are operationalized in the form of decisions affecting people’s lives (political, medical etc.), such beliefs tend to focus upon the individual when solutions to problems are sought. This can, for instance, be seen in courses arranged for people with chronic pain, aiming at changing people’s attitudes or life-stories, believed to make them more functional. I am not denying that there is a difference that makes a difference between modest and extreme beliefs in transformation. A belief in chanting ‘money, money’ as a way of attracting money does differ from a belief in the possibility of changing the way one experiences having little money. A belief in disease as a direct result of the attitudes of the sick person, that someone’s cancer would disappear if they thought the right thoughts, does differ from a belief in certain attitudes, actions and precautions as influencing your health. And I am not denying the possibility of “believing in yourself” as enabling you to make choices that indeed could develop your life in a different direction. My point is not to discuss ontological matters. My point is that modest views as well as extreme ones are to be found on the same continuum, and the difference between them is one of degrees. The strong version of Karma builds very much upon mainstreams in society.

with complex organic connections where concepts of beginning and end do not belong. For instance, what may seem like separate aspen-trees on the surface, is actually just one enormous, intricate organism underneath the surface.

True, when doing fieldwork I spoke to many people operating with the concept of Karma, whereas I have never heard the word used at the Institute of Anthropology. But if, instead of getting hung up on the concept Karma, we rather look at the patterns of reasoning it entails, the lines must be drawn differently. There is no longer an ‘us’ and a ‘them’, as we are rather dealing with a complexity of intertwining and colliding discourses, criss-crossing, fusing and colliding, in ways that has implications for what we can understand as constituting a social environment and context. Heelas says that New Age highlights aspects of the cultural world in which we live, and that studying it contributes to the examination of our cultural values, assumptions and difficulties, all set in connection with cultural change (1999). I believe that assuming New Age as what Sutcliffe (2003:3) calls a *sui generis* entity may prevent us from truly drawing from the potential of knowledge Heelas points out. If ever so inadvertently, the concept of New Age tends to conjure up an entity of ‘The Other’, not only veiling the fact that we are dealing with a multitude of different criss-crossing discourses, but that we are also dealing with more general patterns of thinking that can even be found within our own discipline, which would be better off addressed as such.

### **7.3.2 Karma and social engagement**

Elaboration on Karma and causality made many different stories crystallize. As opposed to proponents of the strong version of Karma, some informants made these elaborations into points of departure for emphasizing our social responsibilities. For instance, when talking to the teacher of the Western Buddhist Order (established when I was nearing the end of fieldwork), he pointed the following out on his own initiative:

*“You asked about different kinds of practice? Well, I should have mentioned that the Buddhist project is not just about the individual. It is about seeing yourself in relationship to other human beings. That is where being a vegetarian comes in. Not just human beings, but also animals. If you can avoid harming and killing other living beings to survive, you may choose to do so. In addition, when making a living, you have to ask, how can I do that in the best possible way? First and foremost, to avoid creating suffering. Not working in the military, etc. But you also have to question being part of trades that are aggressive, like marketing. You should try to engage in*

*work where you can do something good for others. Working with people who have the same values as yourself, I think that is a good thing. We can try to create a business base for other Buddhists, so that Buddhists can work with other Buddhists. Like in Manchester, where I come from, they have opened a Vegan café in the basement, for instance. It is a way of working together, to offer something positive, and make a living on that. In addition we have more outreaching projects, for instance in India. A lot of people are engaged in basic things like health care, or basic education, reading, writing, to improve living conditions especially for the caste-less. Members of the Western Buddhist Order try to widen their practice, so that they can practice all the time, through their daily living.”*

He is not just making an abstract speech about the importance of integrating meditation into everyday life, but he gives very specific examples, and emphasizes, on his own initiative, the importance of social and environmental awareness and action. Choosing your work with caution, the opening up of Vegan cafés, projects that aim at improving the living conditions of poor people, this all tells about ideals that are made into part of solid action. When having my interview with him, the very first thing he starts talking about is vegetarianism. He tells me that they have talked quite a bit about not killing in this group, and that a natural consequence is to become a vegetarian. It takes time, though, he says, but he thinks that most of the people there have started to change. Having people there at meditations and retreats is also an opportunity to show how simple it is to be a vegetarian, I am told.

*“To practice, to really wish to seek enlightenment, that is the first and most important thing. Living ethically is an expression of that.”*

Not only does he explicitly point out that working against social injustice is important, including injustice towards animals as fellow sentient beings. But the fact that it is the first issue he addresses, that he does so repeatedly, and that it is done on his own initiative, tell a story in itself. The same emphasis on action was also made by the informant who upheld Karma as being about social structures, concluding that *“So you have to establish organizations like Attac and stuff, to push! [ ] We have to mobilize people to turn the stream of Karma. In the direction of a better society.”* This informant had in fact attended the opening of Attac<sup>45</sup> in Norway the night before.

<sup>45</sup> On the homepages of Attac one can read that “Attac was founded in 1998 and its first concrete proposal was the taxation of financial transactions in order to create a development fund and to help curb stock market speculation. This is what gave A T T A C its name: the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions to Aid Citizens. Today, the Attac network is present in many countries and is active on a wide range of issues: the WTO and international financial institutions, debt, taxation of financial transactions, tax havens, public services, water, free-trade zones (Mediterranean, American, European etc.). In each country, the association has groups working on various themes. All of these groups are involved in national and international campaigns whose aim is to propose concrete alternatives to neoliberal orthodoxy,

## 7.4 *Pluralism, patterns and cacophony*

The strong version of Karma is contested. What is more, among people advocating the strong version of Karma, there were different versions and degrees of it. People open to the idea of human beings choosing their own parents, could introduce modifying elements, presenting the choices as being pretty much unconscious. That is, less a choice than a result of patterns laid in former lives. One informant compared it to beginning with heroin, and explained that on one level it is the result of actions-reactions and choices made, but that does not make it an informed and good choice. The idea was that messed up, hurting people make messed up hurtful choices, which calls for compassion, and that we are all struggling with our own mess. Many would also tell the story of the historical Buddha, who is said to have used the following metaphor: if a person is hit by a poisonous arrow, you don't spend time analyzing where it came from or the reasons why it hit, you just do all you can to remove the arrow and save the person. Meaning: our task is to help, not to analyze and judge why things happen to others.

One of the teachers I spoke to responded as follows when I expressed my concerns about the strong version of Karma:

*“If that kind of thing is being said, I would ask, who says so? Is it Mrs. Layman who says it, which is common in the East, just like if you ask Mrs. Layman about Christianity in this country, right, if you are good you come to Heaven, if you are bad, then God is mad at you, sort of. If there were advanced teachers, if the Dalai Lama came and said something like that, then I would start to wonder, what is this?”*

His point is a very important one. *Who, indeed, says what?* I noticed *differences*. And one distinction could be made between the elaborations of people who had been deeply involved in and studying Buddhism for years, like teachers, and people who were laymen. In the next two paragraphs I will illustrate how talking about the same concept, Karma, has the potential of producing different elaborations.

### 7.4.1 General practitioners and laymen on Karma

In this paragraph I will quote people who are very reflective, very engaged, but not experts on Buddhism in the sense of being teachers – on the issue of Karma.

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based on solidarity.” (<http://www.attac.org/?lang=en>, last accessed 2007-11-08).

*“Buddhism talks about the human being as basically perfect, only there are some obstacles to our being perfect. Buddhism looks at the human being as basically good, and that you are part of your own process, you are not dependent on the mercy of God, but what you do matters. It is about effort. Not a lottery. Buddhism has a perspective that goes over several lives, which Christianity does not have. I think it is very strange and meaningless to explain everything that happens within the perspective of one lifetime. Like, what have I done to deserve the life I have? And especially when thinking about those who really suffer, like the poor children in Africa whose parents have died from AIDS, and that they are now being bombed to pieces in Afghanistan, and, what have three year old kids done to deserve this? It is meaningless if you don’t apply a greater perspective. Which I think that Buddhism does. [ ] Buddhism talks about cause and effect. Sometimes one talks about “instant Karma” jokingly; you laugh at someone, and the next moment you do the same thing yourself, and then they laugh at you instead... But it is not like an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, like in the Old Testament. It is more that our actions create patterns, patterns that influence our continued development in life. And some of what we are working with in Buddhism is to dissolve these patterns, so that we don’t end up in the same traps over and over again. Some of these patterns are patterns we bring with us from one life to another, if we are not able to dissolve them. That can be a cause for the uncomfortable things that happen to us. We have made patterns that end up like that. And that we are supposed to learn something about changing that pattern, that we have it pointed out that way, so we can do something about it.*

This woman talked about having patterns “pointed out”, so I asked “pointed out by whom?” She answers:

*“No, no. When I say “having it pointed out”, I rather mean that one manages to see what is happening, that one manages to see that there is a pattern, that there is a lesson to be learnt. And that is always a good thing to look for. That which repeats itself, that which becomes a pattern; that is the lesson for this life. If you constantly end up in the same situation, it means that there is something to learn. Not like a victim, but to a greater extent to decide your own destiny.”*

She talks about deciding ones own destiny, so I ask, does unfairness exist? She answers:

*“Yes, it does. One will always have a long perspective and a short; you talk about the relative truth and the absolute truth. Most of us have to relate to a relative truth in everyday life. And even though you talk about everything being an illusion, if*

*you don't stop for the cars, they will drive over you. You have to be able to handle several perspectives simultaneously."*

Isn't the perception of unfairness an important imperative for action, for helping? I ask.

*"Both Buddhism and Hinduism talk about Karma; cause and effect, several lives, and it can have several different implications. The typical thing is that when you see others being exposed to accidents and problems, with a traditional Christian mind you want to help, or we can say that we should not get mixed up in the fate of others. So there are always two choices. Or several, for that matter... That's why there has to be compassion in addition to insight. That's very central in Buddhism, all the way. Not just insight, but compassion."*

By talking about the importance of combining insight with compassion, this informant is an example of another recurring pattern in the elaborations of my informants: the elaboration of many different elements, presented as mutually stabilizing, with *balance* as a key word, emphasizing the importance of *avoiding the extreme*: "*not just insight, but compassion*".

Another informant elaborates on the issue of why she chose Buddhism, and the concept of Karma comes up:

*"Karma-thinking is important to me. Things become much more fair. What you sow is what you reap. In nature, in general, there is always a cause and an effect. Nothing gets started without a cause. It is the same way with Karma. If you sow something good, you get something good back. And if you sow something bad, well, then you have to pay. That philosophy suits me very well! [ ] I used to think there were accidental incidents. But now I don't. Because, if you look at accidents, it is strange that some survive, and some don't. If the brick was not intended to hit my head, I might have reacted in time and jumped away. You hear about that kind of stuff. There is some reason that I get hurt, or die there and then. What is terrible is to think about why things happen to little children, that is the worst thing I can think of. It is not for us to understand that. But seen from the outside, there is a reason for that, too. Karma. Karma, that some come to Earth and does not stay that long. It happens to give the parents certain experiences, too. But there is a lot of tough stuff... If you don't get the Karma effect in this life, you might get it in some later life, things that you have to continue to learn in your next life. But through spiritual practice you can dissolve Karma, in a way "cleanse" things, so that you can change your direction. But for that to happen, you have to learn from what has happened. Start to think*



*differently. I don't look at Karma as punishment. I see it as lessons, learning. When somebody experiences tough stuff, it is not punishment. I don't believe it is like in Christianity, if you are not good the Devil comes..."*

The next informant enters the concept of Karma when telling about certain events in her life:

*"My daughter had a tumor on her brain some years ago. Of course, it was a shock; it was a really tough experience. It went well, in the sense that it was not malignant, but half her face has become paralyzed. But she has read a lot of Buddhism, she has come pretty far that way in this, I can see how it has helped her. She is incredibly mature. I never thought the thought, "why us?" Why me, why her? And I have never heard her say so, either. The world is full of suffering, so that thought did not occur to me. And it would have, a few years ago. I am convinced that it helped me through that process.*

I asked her why that thought would have hit her earlier, but not now. She answers:

*"I have gained some more understanding of what suffering is. A little greater understanding of the importance of understanding that you are responsible yourself for what happens to you. It sounds banal, but "it is the fault of the boss", "it is everybody else's fault that my love is unhappy", and "everybody else's fault that I cannot make this and that", instead of saying that whatever happens to me, it is actually, maybe my own Karma. There is a reason why I have to go through this, there is something I have done in the past that I have to learn in order to move on. I believe that is very important. And without being a Buddhist, I believe it is very important, at least to learn that at the very first thought of feeling sorry for yourself, then try to turn it around. Just that little insight has meant a lot to me, for the content of my life. And it just means more and more. You become more conscious."*

I ask her, doesn't it become an extra burden, if you start blaming yourself? She answers:

*"Yes, but it is not that dramatic. I don't think that concretely about it. But when you have worked a bit with it, and gained a greater understanding of larger interconnections, that there is an interconnection, that we create our own reality, that's important to understand. And it has something to do with understanding things in a wider context than just staring at your own belly button. It is about seeing how much suffering there is in the worlds, that you are not the only one. This story about the mother who lost her child, I don't know if you remember it. She came to the Buddha and wanted him to raise the child from the dead. And she got the message that if she could come with a mustard seed from a house where there had been no*

*suffering, he would raise the child from the dead. I think that is such a strong tale. When you get that understanding, that you are able to rise above your own little world, then you see things differently. Even though we might need a few days to see it when things become very dramatic. And yet, to keep it in the back of your head, it helps when you draw your breath, at least. And in everyday life, a simple recipe like, if you feel sorry for yourself, the best thing is to find someone who is worse off, and try to help them. It is incredible how there are such simple recipes that are so fundamental. And that is the genial thing about this philosophy. It is fundamental stuff. And so simple, actually! But the more you try it, the more you will see how strong those tools are. It is just incredible.”*

#### **7.4.2 Experts on Karma**

In this paragraph I will continue by presenting elaborations made by teachers or people who are experts in the sense of having studied and practiced Buddhism in depth for years. The first informant I will be quoting has been deeply engaged in Buddhism since the seventies. He tells me that he got fed up by translations that seemed inaccurate: one person said one thing, another said something different. So he decided to learn the language himself, to see for himself what was written. He studied Pali. Today he has written books on Buddhism, as well as translated Buddhist texts. He says the following on the strong version of Karma:

*“In the Vedic Brahman environment at the time of the Buddha, they had theories about Atman, as you might have heard. Atman was pictured as this entity who experiences and acts within the person. The self is like a separate little guy inside you. This is what the Buddha makes polemics against. Anatta [non-self] can be understood as a polemic against Brahman theories. The other possibility can be found in the Pali grammar. You have Atta, which is a personal pronoun that may mean “self” in everyday situations. But Pali has eight conjugational forms, and one of them is the genitive case. So when Atta is used in contexts where it is conjugated, it does not mean “self” anymore, but “one’s own”. In many of the early dialogues it seems like this is the meaning the Buddha uses. When he says that there is Anatta, he says nothing about the Brahman theory of “self” other than an ironic play with words. He simply says that “it is not yours; you have no control over it”. For instance, in some known texts he says that your body is Anatta. If it had not been Anatta, but Atta, you would not get sick! But if you use the genitive interpretation, you don’t have control over your body. If you did, you would not get sick. And your*

*emotions, they are Anatta. If you forget the self/no-self theory, and look at the possibilities of control, if you had control over your emotions, would you be angry or sad? No.*

*But you have no control. You have to accept living in a world you cannot control. There is where you find the practical meaning of Anatta, it has nothing to do with the Brahmins, and nothing to do with theories of the self, it is simply practical: You cannot control this, so try to find a different solution! Live in the world, as it is, simply! But because Anatta may mean “no self”, it seems like the meaning of no control was early forgotten. In the early dialogues in the Pali texts, you find the no-control interpretation. But then it fades away more and more. And that’s when you get a more dogmatic interpretation. But I don’t quite believe in that dogmatic interpretation. It makes more sense in the contexts that the Buddha uses it. However, I also have a feeling that the Buddha might have used all these different interpretations. In many situations, the old Indians loved playing with words. The problem is, how the heck do you translate such play with words?”*

In general, teachers I talked to would emphasize this: that as there is no self, there is nothing that can be reborn, and thus it does not make sense to talk about personalized Karma in the sense that a person could deserve being born with a disease or disability. One teacher points out that

*“I have heard that there are no enlightened persons, there are only enlightened qualities. I find that logical, because a person is actually, when you are enlightened, you have deconstructed your belief in yourself as a person, as an independent entity. It makes more sense to talk about enlightened qualities, rather than persons.”*

Yet another person who has dedicated his life to Buddhism, and taken part in the establishing of the Buddhist groups in the sixties, says that

*“I have speculated a lot about the concept of Karma, and it has started to get clearer now, I feel. I believe the concept of Karma, it is very difficult and very simple, the Karma concept you mentioned here [I have been voicing my concern about the strong version of Karma] is a layman’s version of a Hindu Karma conception. In my opinion, that is not Buddhism. Especially not when it is about rebirth, when the essence of Buddhism is that nothing can be reborn! Then we are talking about transmigration of souls. And that’s not Buddhism. Genro had a funny remark; I don’t know if he said this after a question or just came up with it, about Karma. Or rebirth.*

*Do you believe in rebirth? And he asked: what day is it today? Thursday, they said. Well, on Thursdays I don't believe in it! (laughs) A good answer. In a way, the Buddhist Karma concept is in a way very easy to understand. At the same time as it is very complex. The whole mechanics, the phenomenon. My working model is simple. But in this simple version the mystique is gone. And people have such a bloody need for mystique! They are clinging frantically to mystique, and it can be used to mere fatalism; this has been decided, you can't do anything about it, or: I am not well off now, but when I am reborn everything will be better. And of course, most people have such needs, at the level of laymen maybe even more. I think Karma is like a pedagogical tool to make people understand that their actions have consequences. Very few people understand that what they do has consequences. People really don't understand that. That others do, yes, but that what I do.. No.. Start to look at yourself, and realize that your actions have consequences. If you do something, it has consequences. That is an aspect of the pedagogical.*

*Rebirth as a consequence of Karma, it cannot be about me being reborn, as I don't exist. That is not possible. Karma comes from the root kri, which means "work". Karma simply means "work". Or action. Implicit action and its consequence. Action is a cause and a consequence. But there are causes and conditions. The fact that we sit here, has its causes. Actual events that took place four billion years ago, an accumulation of events, phenomena, things, actions, that have built up to this situation. The human being arose in an evolutionary context from certain conditions. And did so and so which led to us being here. Our forefathers have done things that have made us sit here in a house here and now. There is an accumulation of action, in endless times. So there is in a way, actually a background and a cause in this situation here and now. But what we do from here, we decide ourselves. A lot of it is there so we have our history, our background, all kinds of strange stuff that contributes to pushing us in a certain direction, but actually we don't have to do what our personality is programmed to do. I can jump into that window, but I won't, but I can do anything! So, the fact that I am sitting here now, and you are sitting there now, it is in a way decided by Karma. That is history, in a way. That's how it is. Nobody can deny that that's the situation up to now. But from now on, we have power to do a lot."*

I ask him, but when making choices we encounter certain limits, don't we? There is something more than just my actions that count? What about social aspects?

*“That’s precisely what Karma is about. All those social conditions are Karma. It is the sum of all human activity through billions of years. I can decide not to pay my taxes, but it will have consequences. And if I do pay them, I can do it in a hundred different ways. I can say that I pay my taxes with pleasure, because it is used for this and that, and it comes back to me, it contributes to the creation of a society I wish for. Or I can say, hell, I don’t want to pay taxes, it is my money. I can be happy or angry and pissed, that’s up to me. Karma is demands that I sit here today and pay taxes. But everything around it I can decide myself. Karma is a trivial concept, nothing mysterious. It is not any cosmic, strange thing. It isn’t! [ ]*

*Buddhism does not acknowledge the subject, the person as anything existing absolutely, so Karma is not personal in that sense. It is not a person’s actions in a succession of former lives that make him end up in a certain situation; it is the accumulated actions of humanity that leads to someone ending up in that situation, and another in another situations. It is not because I have been super nice for five hundred generations that I am sitting in a nice house in Oslo, it is not my personal merit. It is a large complex what leads to things being what they are. So you have to establish organizations like Attac and stuff, to push! The slogan of Attac is, a different world is possible. The push to go even further in a crazy world is so enormous that we have to mobilize people to turn the stream of Karma. In the direction of a better society. It is the sum of our actions that gives the total Karma. An individualized Karma is nonsense. My freedom and my responsibility is here and now, my responsibility in relationship to my actions in relationship to the world and reality, that’s my responsibility. I am bound by the past and stuff like that, and yet I have a relatively great degree of freedom that I have to use in a positive manner. If I am hurting, it is because the accumulated Karma of the world has led to this situation. From here on in principle, all possibilities are open. And then one just has to fight to make it go in the best possible direction from now on. Every minute we have to turn it. But that a single person is in a situation because of personal Karma; that is absurd. That is not Buddhism. Because that person does not have any existence from a Buddhist perspective.”*

Another person says that:

*“it is dangerous to get lost in the past, thinking that people have a disability because they deserve it, that is very dangerous. There are warnings about this in the old scriptures, too. The Buddha says that it is useless trying to figure out all the*

*Karmic connections behind the way things are. Because it is so complicated. [ ] I prefer to look at Karma as a useful tool for planning. You know, if things are to happen, you have to make an effort, create good Karma. If you want to be friends with your neighbor, you have to be nice to him sometimes. Simple as that.”*

And yet another person points out what many more would tell me:

*“The interconnections are so complex, that the Buddha warns against speculation about Karma. Don’t speculate about Karma, you will never get an overview, anyway. Don’t speculate in the extent of the consequences of deeds and why it is like that, why I am like this, and how it is. You can see parts of it, but not the total picture, not the intricate interconnection of lines and threads between all phenomena and influences. It is impossible for an ordinary person to have any overview. It is impossible.”*

## 7.5 Sameness and difference

### 7.5.1 Creative twists

The emphasis on development and transformation was strong among my informants in general. In general, believing that human beings can develop, maybe even across several lifetimes, and maybe even reach an ultimate state of enlightenment, is what I will call an *evolutionary model*, in the sense that, metaphorically speaking, we are understood as climbing a ladder, on which we can be anywhere between the top and the bottom. This seems to have a logical implication: If one accepts that a person can develop into different stages, different persons can be on different stages as well, which makes differences into something that can be arranged hierarchically. As one of my informants pointed out, this hierarchical thinking is behind ideas of the teacher as beyond critique. To me the element of hierarchy seemed to collide with the emphasis on “everything as being actually the same”. However, quite contrary to talking about hierarchy, most of my informants emphasized implications of the evolutionary model that led to elaborations on the theme of “*oneness*”, not difference:

*“I guess that’s what I like about Buddhism, that everything is interconnected. I think that Buddhism underlines that very clearly. Human beings, animals, plants and minerals, we all are interconnected. In time and space, we are interconnected with everything in the universe. There are fine threads connecting us. Others have said it, too, that nobody is an island by himself. Don’t ask whom the bells are tolling,*

*for they are tolling for you.<sup>46</sup> That's a bit of the same idea. What happens today in Afghanistan also influences my life. Things are interconnected. I think it is pretty interesting when I read about gene research. To begin with one believed that the human being had 140,000 genes, and then it turns out that we only have about 30,000! And that is kind of sad, when a banana-fly has about 13,000 genes, a yeast-cell has 6000, and a simple worm has 19,000... (laughs ironically) It demonstrates what Buddhism has claimed, that we are of the same essence<sup>47</sup>. It is a bit coincidental what we have become. That's also one of the areas where I think Buddhism is at its best, that there is not much of a difference. That's something I have reacted against in Christianity. And other religions. That there is so much difference between us and the animals. I don't believe there is. But it does not make us less worth! We are not degraded by not being "something different". On the contrary. I think science shows that as well, in a way. The way we have looked at nature is so degrading. [ ] So I guess that is one of the reasons why, this interconnectedness, that there is not much difference between human beings and animals."*

Instead of focusing upon reincarnation as implying (different) stages in evolution, in turn implying a hierarchy of beings at different stages of development, the idea of reincarnation is emphasized as something that *connects us all*. Even biological evolution is presented as something that makes us into *beings of the same essence*, as a basis for emphasizing the necessity of showing all sentient beings *equal respect*.

### 7.5.2 On plurality and coherence

I have pointed out the existence of patterns in the stories of my informants, illustrating how many different people could elaborate on similar themes as for instance transformation, development and the body. I have also illustrated the ways these themes were elaborated on could differ. Even though two persons may be talking about Karma, a person emphasizing that a person cannot have control, is not making the same claims as a person emphasizing how we create our reality. In this paragraph I will follow up my observations of similarities and differences a bit further. My aim is to prepare for the chapters to come, where I will

<sup>46</sup> This informant refers to the English author John Donne: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. [ ] and therefore never send to know for whom the bells toll; it tolls for thee." The quote is taken from "I Meditation XVII", to be found in "Devotions upon emergent occasions" (Donne, John; Sparrow, John 1923, Cambridge: University Press).

<sup>47</sup> This informant and I discussed the best word to use, in translating the Norwegian word "*stoff*" into English. There is some rightful concern that the word "essence" might carry connotation to ideas of a "core", which would not be correct. Her suggestions were to use the concept "material" or simply "stuff".

thematize how different ways of handling data-material generated by way of narrative interviewing have implications for what aspects of the life-story we can shed light upon.

One of my informants says the following when I ask him about why he has found Buddhism interesting:

*“I guess there was an aha-experience, starting to see the mechanics of what goes on in there... (points to the head). Starting to see some of the phenomena of mind. And I do not mean hallelujah or psychedelic experience. I am talking about pretty grey and dull meditation. It is like opening the trunk of a car, seeing how it works inside your mind, understanding the nature of the relationship between the world and me, what I feel, sense, smell. The object, you might say, and the subject, the one who sees, hears and smells; how that relation is. The experience of seeing it directly, it is very fascinating. I don’t quite know how to describe it. Hmmmmm.... No, now we are entering areas where I cannot find words.... You have to ask more!”*

What was it about Buddhism that appealed to you? I ask.

*“There were many aspects. I have to think back, to the Zen stories; it was actually those stories that made me turn to Buddhism. They were a bit enigmatic, possibilities of seeing other aspects of reality than you are used to seeing. That being has other sides to it than what we usually walk in. And it does not have to deal with gods and mysticism; it is simply about a different way of looking at things. That is something I felt the Zen stories pointed towards. If you see things differently, things seem different, they are still the same, but different. A lot of that was implicit in the Zen stories. That’s what woke my curiosity. Koan and strange Zen stories have had their mission, absolutely... Apart from that, there are many things. The possibility of intellectual honesty, that you don’t have to believe something just for the sake of believing it, that you can conduct your own research; it has some kind of scientific spirit about it, which encourages you to do your own research. That is what is exciting about meditation; it is a way of exploring reality. But at the same time, it is not just cold exploration, it has ethical aspects. I found that very appealing. Doing research not just to do research, making atomic bombs and what the heck... But that you relate to your fellow human beings. How we can do that in a good way. It is an ideology one does not have to be ashamed of, neither intellectually nor ethically.”*

This informant tells me that he found the Zen stories fascinating, because they presented the possibility of seeing other aspects of reality than we are used to. Seeing reality in new ways



changes the way you experience it, he says. He emphasizes the potential for change as important to his interest in Buddhism, but when doing so he also points out that he is talking about a kind of transformation that has nothing to do with “*gods, magic or mysticism*”. It is simply about exploring reality from a different perspective, of “*looking at things in a different way*”. He talks beamingly about “*gray and dull meditation*”, and describes the process of looking at one’s own mind through the metaphor of “*looking into the motor of a car*”.

Another informant demonstrates a similar way of talking when telling about the people who first became engaged in the Zen School:

*“They did not come because this was exciting and interesting. The typical reaction was that when they read some Koans, small conversations between master and student, and when they read it they recognized something. There was some kind of recognition, maybe a memory of some kind of experience. Something that was well known. Not exotic, not exciting, but well known. Those were the typical reactions for those who stayed: “That’s the way it is!” There is something there that has nothing to do with the exotic or the exciting. And that’s why I am not fanatic, but a pretty hard adversary to New Age stuff. To me New Age is a diametrical opposite of Buddhism.”*

He says that Buddhism is not about the exciting and the interesting, it is rather about what he calls “*the well known*”, or about “*a recognition*”. By doing so he adds to the pattern of emphasizing continuity, which I found among many of my informants. He also points out Buddhism as pragmatic. He emphasizes that Buddhism has nothing to do with “*the exotic or the exciting*”, and he repeats this twice. Then he follows this up by contrasting Buddhism with New Age. He presents Buddhist meditation as having to do with firm grounding in the body, with its emphasis on the body, on the breath. He conceives of New Age as representing the opposite: as theoretical elaboration with no grounding. He puts emphasis on the importance of Buddhism as a pragmatic, non-mystical practice. Another informant elaborates in a similar manner, claiming that

*“If something is exciting and interesting it is usually wrong. If it is simple and obvious, I believe that it is more often right. The Buddhist claim is that we are all enlightened, we have just messed things up so badly that we don’t see reality. It is not possible to become enlightened. You are already enlightened. You simply have to discover it. Blow away the fog or polish the window! There is nothing exotic to discover, just allow yourself to be enlightened”.*

This informant also talks about Buddhism as being about seeing reality in a different way. Again a potential for change and transformation is pointed out. And yet again, it is pointed

out as being about something as pragmatic as polishing the window or blowing away the fog: *“There is nothing exotic to discover”*. The above quotes have something in common: The emphasis on *“the pragmatic”*, and skepticism towards *“the exotic and mysterious”*. These quotes are part of stories that conjure up a certain kind of reality, one that is captured well by the metaphor of *“looking into the motor of a car”*.

Other stories conjured up other realities to me as a listener. The following informant tells me about her first meeting with the teacher of Dharma Sah in the eighties. The teacher had been introduced to her as clairvoyant:

*“This was a very strong and important meeting. She immediately placed me and saw me for who I was, not the smiling outside, but she saw the inside, and she saw that there was not much correspondence between inside and outside. And that was strange, she immediately saw that I had a lot of negativity, nobody had discovered that before, or said it to me ever. And she gave me a mantra that I was supposed to use to get it better. She advised me regarding what I should do, how I should practice, and told me that things would go better little by little. [ ] In addition to being clairvoyant, she is also an energy master; she sends energy on a daily basis. Which may seem strange and alien if you have not been part of the practice. But to us who have been doing it for years, we see how our lives have gotten more direction, and I have to speak for myself, but I feel better and better. There is something about finding the center and staying there.”*

Just like my other informants, this informant elaborates on the theme of change and transformation. But she does so by talking about mantras, affirmation and energies. I am told that Dharma Sah has weekly meditations on Tuesdays, because all the centers in Europe have their meetings then: There is energy created by this simultaneous practice. Another element specific to this group is that Dae Poep Sa Nim has made an image with each of the participants. The image can for instance be the goal you have in life. She guides them on how to use it. It is a sort of visualization, I am told, which is between Dae Poep Sa Nim and the student in question, you don't share it with anybody else. I am told that it can be ok to wish for a partner in life, and you can get help to move on in that direction:

*“It is positive affirmations. You have this image. You use it during evening meditations, and you may have a picture of Dae Poep Sa Nim in front of you. It has to do with energy. It is easy to misunderstand, and believe that it has to do with*

*worshipping, but it is not. It is merely about having her there, receiving the energy. You may even close your eyes.”*

The realities conjured up by concepts of mantras and affirmations differ from the realities conjured up by stories where the motor-metaphor dominated.

All of my informants are logical and consistent. But they are consistent in different ways, creating logic and coherence that is specific to their stories. Transformation and change are recurring themes in every story, but they are talked about in very different ways. Some of these differences are related to the fact that these informants belong to different Buddhist traditions. But this fact intertwines with my observation that every informant had his/her specific concerns, born out of a life lived, which not only can be assumed to have influenced their choice of tradition to begin with, but also the way they related to the tradition in question, what elements they emphasized and the way these were integrated into their lives. I spotted individual differences regarding how people created internal logic and coherence in their stories. These are observations that do surface in my former paragraphs, but I have not pursued these issues as such, which I am about to do now.

In the former paragraphs I divided the stories of my informants into elements and themes, and arranged these systematically. Doing so allowed me to preserve the anonymity of the storytellers, as well as to draw attention to the existence of similarities and differences in the stories told, and discern the existence of patterns. Doing so is a generally accepted way of proceeding when conducting narrative analysis (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999), and a useful one. But something is lost as well: The elements in the stories build upon each other in ways that create meaning in themselves. The reflections that my informants engaged in are woven into a totality that presenting them in bits and pieces cannot capture. The way I have presented my data-material in the former paragraphs has not been well suited to demonstrating the internal coherence of the stories told. What is more: the approach I have utilized in the former paragraphs has no way of pursuing elements of consistency that the individual informant demonstrates over time, a consistency that constitutes an important observation in itself when trying to understand people's agendas, and to understand the life-story as a phenomenon. In the next two chapters I will provide an empirical basis for my claim of consistency over time. After having provided this empirical basis, I will continue with a discussion of its implications in the final chapter.

The observant reader will have spotted quotes in the former paragraphs that indicate how the activities or ideas the individual informant found relevant to elaborate upon was closely knit to specific concerns. I have referred to informants mentioning struggles, doubts, hard work, demonstrating how their projects of seeking were grounded in lives lived: *“I was dealing with matters of life and death, and games of word and logic were not good enough”*, and: *“I really experienced life on my body, the world just poured in over me. [ ] My very fundament crumbled”* or: *“The moment I realize that I don’t exist essentially, I merely exist in a relational sense, there is nothing essential that is me, that’s when anxiety comes. You get really... the sweat is pouring, the tears are running and, and...”* These quotes bear witness of basic existential issues being addressed that are in no way touched upon lightly. As such these quotes can be said to constitute a foretaste of what is to come in the next chapters, where I want to conduct a more detailed tracing of stories about seeking. I want to make a point of showing how doing so constitutes a different gaze, bringing out other aspects of the stories told.

## 8. Stories about seeking

### 8.1 Introduction

I have written my way through stories about Buddhist groups, Buddhism, stories about people and places and reflections on life, all somehow linked to the existence of the place I ended up as a young student, working my way through existential issues. The Buddhist center I came to was a place in space and time, manifested by, and itself manifesting, numerous aspects of a multifaceted reality, which I have attempted to slice at from different angles.

When doing research, analyzing and writing, Deleuze and Guattari warn about approaches that create a false conception of a voyage and movement, they warn against seeking any ground zero out there, a beginning or foundation. They warn against the creation of tree-shaped constructions, in the sense of confusing the necessity of creating texts with a beginning, middle and an end with features inherent in the phenomena we are studying (1988). They even experiment with creating texts where the chapters can be read in any order, so as to avoid the creation of the dreaded tree. I am not able to operate on such a sophisticated level. But the way my text has ended up looking, is a result of my understanding of my task as one of portraying what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) would call rhizomatic complexities. Deleuze and Guattari use the metaphor of the rhizome to communicate the complexities of social reality. Based upon their call for the use of multiple, non-hierarchical points of entry and exit in data-representation and interpretation, I have chosen to divide my text into different parts, where I utilize different kinds of data-material as points of departure, and I utilize different ways of handling the data-material in question. I may not have performed satisfactorily, but I defend the idea behind my enterprise as a good one, especially as one of my aims have been to show how reality can be opened up as different realms of enquiry.

In the next two chapters I will be probing into *stories about seeking in general*. The people telling these stories are people I met at meditational gatherings. These people were not necessarily Buddhists. Some of them might not know much about Buddhism at all. Some were even accidental drop-ins, just visiting a course or two. Our conversations were not about

Buddhism or the group or course where we met. Our conversations were about their respective quest of seeking. What seeking entails will vary depending on the individual seeker, on what happens to be at stake in her/his life. This means that even though my basic question was why they had come to a Buddhist meditational gathering or course, the stories that my question opened up for did not necessarily revolve around themes related to Buddhism, at least not directly. As such these conversations differ from those I have formerly presented, where my very point of departure was questions about Buddhism, the group and the specific tradition of Buddhism that they represented. In the formerly presented conversations, I made Buddhism an explicit thematic point of departure, setting the stage in ways that colored the stories produced. What is more, my formerly presented conversations were with people much dedicated to Buddhism, and/or the group in question. Issues pertaining to Buddhism intertwined with their lives in ways it never could to a person who was merely visiting a single meditational gathering. As a result, the stories I have presented until now have revolved around Buddhism in ways that it never could, and was never intended to do, in the conversations I am about to present.

Because of the large amount of people visiting the Buddhist centers, the stories I am about to present could be made anonymous by merely changing the names of people and places. This allows for a more coherent presentation, compared to how I have presented stories earlier in the text. Doing so enabled me to pursue other aspects of the stories told. In this chapter I will begin by focusing on conversations with two different informants, whom I will call Marit and Martin. Though slightly edited compared to the original transcripts, and with my added comments along the way, I have tried to present their stories in great detail, being as true as possible to the way the stories were told to me originally. I do so for a reason. The details I present are important to the analytical points I will be making in the last chapter. Presenting life-stories in bits and pieces open up other realms of enquiry than presenting them coherently does. In the last chapter I will pick up threads and themes that the preceding chapters have introduced, and I will probe deeper into how our analytical proceedings are decisive for what aspects of the stories that can be addressed, drawing heavily upon phenomenology.

Creating a readable text has some demands of its own, which I have had to weigh up against my analytical need of preserving the stories the way they were told to me. I have indeed cut the material down. However, I kept the cutting down to a minimum, and I tried to cut down in ways that may highlight what I understood to be the main issues of the informant in question. For instance, when an informant and I start talking about the rhubarb-dessert he is making

while we are talking, it has not been integrated into my text. Or when an informant tells me in great detail about different Buddhist groups he has read about on the internet. What he told me was interesting, as well as the fact that he has dedicated so much time to learning, which is an observation in itself, one that I do point out. But I don't go into details of his knowledge about different Buddhist groups and traditions. Instead I move on to his reflections on the activities he has actually engaged in.

Other elements I have cut down on are detailed stories about childhoods and complex family relationships. I do find this information both interesting and relevant, and it has provided me with a much better sense of what was at stake for the informant in question. As such it has been of great value, it has given me clues as to how I should understand, elaborate and present the material that I do write about. But when it comes to making details about complex family relationships explicit, I have been reluctant. For one, it involves other people who are not able to give their consent to the use of this material. Secondly, I have been concerned about any presentation that inadvertently may reduce seeking to a psychological phenomenon, in the sense of 'being about a difficult childhood'. My intention is not to pin phenomena to the wall. People's quests for transformation, and my attempts to understand their quests, are all attempts at navigating a multidimensional reality, from which we report, about which we report. My presentation in this text can merely point to the complexities involved.

I will begin by zooming into the stories told by Marit and Martin. I had a total of four interviews with each of them, over a two-year-period. The reasons why I have chosen to begin with these specific informants are many, apart from the fact that they represent opposite genders. Marit used to be a Christian, but today she has not just turned her back to Christianity and Christian environments, she is, in fact, very much critical of it. Martin, on the other hand, starts out as a general seeker, interested in Buddhism, but ends up defining himself a Christian. When we start having our conversations, Martin is in a process of finding a job, and later on he is in a process of moving on to a job that he likes better than the first. Marit on the other hand has finally managed to rid herself of wage labor, and she talks about wage labor as incompatible with having a meaningful life. A meaningful life is one she conceives of as a life where she can develop. Wage labor is something she found to be the very contrary<sup>48</sup>. Another contrast between Marit and Martin is that Marit talks about the importance of being in control, she says she wants to "*run the train*", whereas Martin talks

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<sup>48</sup> I should point out that Marit as well as Martin has an academic education, which adds to the understanding one can have when she refers to "*meaningless jobs*". I believe many people would consider Marit's job options as entailing interesting, challenging and varied work.

about the impossibility of having control, he says he wants to “*sit in the back seat of the car*”. But both Martin and Marit are preoccupied with bringing about changes in their lives.

## 8.2 Marit

When I started out the period of time defined as fieldwork I met Marit, a woman my own age, at one of the courses for beginners that KTLBS arranges. This happened at a time when the courses that KTLBS arranged were held at the Rinzai Zen Center downtown Oslo. KTLBS rented the place temporarily, until they got their own town center. The room where the teachings took place was the very same where I had experienced my ‘sit and run’-episode, as described in chapter five. As formerly described, the Rinzai Zen Center differed quite a bit from the Gumpa at KTL where I had my first encounter with Buddhism years ago. As the courses were held downtown, it was much easier to attend. But instead of the long travel and walking through the forest you had to walk in an area of the town where I did not feel quite comfortable at night. I would hear other girls mentioning the same thing. However, when entering the building, everything was bright and new inside, with the clean atmosphere that I have formerly described. But it felt different now that it was KTLBS who hosted the course. Instead of sitting in straight lines, people were sitting in the same manner as they had in the Gumpa: scattered around. Instead of everybody wearing black clothes, people were wearing all sorts of clothes, in all sorts of colors. The pillows on which they sat, however, were black, the very same pillows utilized by the Rinzai Zen group.

When I met Marit at this course it was a pleasant surprise. It was not the first time I saw her. We have mutual friends. This means that we have known about each other and each other’s whereabouts for twenty years, and we have met on a few social occasions. But it was her interest in Buddhism and presence at a Buddhist course that made her my informant. She had taken an interest in Buddhism and visited different Buddhist meditations long before I even thought about doing fieldwork. I had a total of four narrative conversations with her, over a period of two years. In addition, I met her at courses and retreats that we both participated at, arranged by KTLBS as well as the Dharma group, including the church of Emmaus, an ecumenical church in Oslo that arranged retreats together with the Dharma group, where Buddhists, Christians and unspecified seekers would meet. Later on Marit became much involved in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, and she would also visit their centers in Great Britain. After my fieldwork Marit kept traveling, even trying out communal living in



Sweden. It seems like every time I revise my text, she is someplace else. But presently (2007-04-10) she is back in Oslo again.

When I first spotted her at a course, she was sitting on a pillow leaning towards the wall, close to the door. Strategically, I would figure out later, because she left before the course was finished. As the months passed, I would notice Marit leaving early at different meditations and gatherings where we were both present. When talking to her in her apartment on a later occasion, she explains that her problem with her back is the reason why. She cannot work anymore because of her back, and her back has also put a limit to how and how much she can meditate, she tells me.

*“I feel I get angry when I feel pain. And if somebody tells me to keep sitting when I am in pain like that, I get furious! If somebody tells me what to do, I get very angry. I need a lot of acceptance, not a pointed finger. If anybody comments on the way I am sitting, I become very much on guard. I prefer having support for my lower back, and I don’t like sitting straight, because it puts too much pressure on my lower spine. So when meditating at home, I actually sit on my couch, leaning back. Sitting for hours on end on an ordinary meditation pillow... that really makes me hurt. If somebody tells me how to do it, I don’t become very easy to deal with... I actually think that the meditation teachers should point out that people with a tendency to take control of their own lives should be more playful in their meditation, relax more, that they should not be so strict with themselves. I think that is important to point out; because I think that there is too much emphasis on the opposite in general. All through childhood. Strictness. It is a pattern that needs to be broken. Why continue that pattern through your meditation...”*

Marit is very elaborate in general. She philosophizes a lot on life, so she tells me, and so I have observed in other social contexts where we have met. The thoughts that she shares with me when talking are constantly being grounded in her own experience, in her body and the life she is living. When talking about her back, she immediately moves to her philosophy of life, and from there she weaves back and fourth:

*“I think it is important to be more present in your body. We need more of that. Stressing around like we do, we forget we have a body, almost. It is about accepting the body, the pain, being present in it.”*

Marit pauses for a moment, and continues:

*“I have been at body-consciousness-groups, and I notice I am very vulnerable. At such groups the basic idea is that you are supposed to go into your own body very much, to sense, and to become conscious of what you are sensing. For instance, become conscious of the soles of your feet. It is a sort of meditation. You go into your body and become conscious of it.”*

From telling about what the body consciousness groups are all about, she moves on to reflecting on her own experience, how vulnerable she feels. From there she moves on to reflecting on what is right for her:

*“And it makes me feel very vulnerable because there is so much that I don’t want to feel in my body... The best way for me to be in my body, is to exercise, to be very active and wear myself out. I can do that, and it feels good. But to go into my body, just sensing that now I am hurting, now my back hurts again... Just having anybody comment on it when my back hurts, when I have been sitting for a long time and stand up – I stand pretty crooked, the fact that it becomes visible to others... It is strange; it is almost as if it was something terrible I had done. It has nothing to do with me, but it feels like a crime I am showing the whole world. I relate to it very strangely. But I believe that my back-pain has haunted me, and forced me to abstain from so much, I have struggled through so much; it is too much, simply. And there is so very little understanding, when I have finally dared to ask for help, I am not being met. There have been so many disappointments.”*

Marit tells about her experience with back-pain. The story about the pain is interwoven with her encounter with other people: *“just having anybody comment on it...”*. And: *“there is so very little understanding”*. Even aspects of the pain itself are presented as connected to her relations to others: She tells about experience comprising a conglomerate of bodily and social aspects.

*“Theoretically I have a very accepting attitude towards it; I have a back problem, and I have to live with it. That is how it is in my head. But when it comes to feeling it, to practice the acceptance – well, I am not there yet... If anybody is to loosen up my tensions, give me a massage on my lower back where it hurts, well, then I am very much, like, uh.... I like getting massages, and then I say that “you may give me a massage everywhere, but not on my lower back. Don’t even touch it!” But then they feel especially like massaging there, saying that this is exactly where you need to loosen up! But there is so much feeling buried there, that I don’t want to admit it...*

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*Maybe it is a point that one should accept that this is the way my body has chosen to do it. That you don't feel bad for not being present in it...."*

### **8.2.1 A creative twist**

Marit talks about the importance of being present in one's body. By doing so, she continues the pattern of thematizing and emphasizing the body that I found in all the stories of all my informants. However, the way in which Marit elaborates the body-theme differs, and so does what she reports doing based upon her convictions. Just sitting still and focusing upon her body does not do her any good, she tells me. She reports that her way of being present in her body is through dancing and wearing herself out physically. The importance of finding your own truths is also to be found in Marit's story. However, practicing what she feels is right for her is often accompanied with struggle. She feels that other people put pressure upon her to conform: to do what *they* think is right. If people give her massages, they tend to want to rub her back where she does not want them to, because they interpret her pain as a sign of this area as "*needing special attention to loosen up*". The pressure felt from other people turns out to be a recurring theme in Marit's stories. Her frequent and forceful elaboration on the issue of pressure make me sense urgency, that there is something at stake for Marit, and that this something is related to her sensing pressure from others.

Marit tells me that she does not yield to this pressure. Marit and the people she experiences as putting pressure on her, share the understanding of her pain being "*feelings buried*". But when it comes to how one is supposed to relate to "*feelings buried*", elements of difference will surface. Marit says that: "*Maybe it is a point to accept that "this is how my body has chosen to do it. That you don't feel bad for not being present in your body...."*" Her statement expresses both acceptance and disagreement. She shares the idea of being present in the body as important, and the importance of acceptance. But she believes in other ways of practicing such presence and acceptance. Sitting still and practicing awareness is not right for her, she says. Marit has her own ideas about how acceptance should be practiced and understood. The way Marit sees it: acceptance can also be *accepting that one cannot accept*. By reflecting upon her own reflections, continually taking 'one step back', looking at her own reactions, looking at her own reflections, I understand her as moving to a meta-level of reflection, allowing her to conclude that: 'I observe that I don't accept, and I accept the fact that I don't accept'. By operating with such different levels of reflection, she manages to reproduce the value put upon acceptance, but at the same time adding something new, a twist. By doing so

she is also communicating another value shared with all my informants: the emphasis on finding your own truths. What is right for others, is not necessarily right for her, she says. And she reports having no intention of becoming a Buddhist as such:

*“I believe that meditation is a good thing, but it is not the only way to go, it is merely one of many alternatives, it is a practice among other practices that I can do in my everyday life.”*

### **8.2.2 A turning point**

When Marit and I had our first conversation during the time defined as fieldwork, I already knew that she used to be an active Christian in her teens. I found it quite interesting that she turned her back to the Christian environment she used to be a part of, so when we had our first conversation I mentioned this, and started out asking Marit to tell me how she ended up where she is today. Marit began an engagement in a Christian environment early, she tells me:

*“It began when I was about thirteen. I was confirmed, and got baptized right afterwards. I had already been baptized as a baby, though, but now I became quite engaged in the Baptist church<sup>49</sup>. I started going to a Bible school in Oslo when I was eighteen. And then I went to America, to a disciple-training school. This is an international organization, but it differs a bit from country to country. In Norway they are a bit rounded on the edges, but in the States they are quite radical. Like, you are supposed to wake the dead and heal the sick, and at least convert all non-Christians!”*

Marit is very matter-of-fact when telling about this period of time. She tells me how this group traveled the world as missionaries. They spent time in Mexico doing charity work at orphanages, they built houses for the homeless, and walked the streets handing out pamphlets. She went home to Norway again, and started going to another Christian school. Here they were taught how to reach “*the people of the world*” as she calls it. Among other things they had intensive wilderness training, as part of the plan was going to Tibet: they needed to know how to survive in the mountains. They went to China, smuggling Bibles along the way, and to the Tibetan border. But they were not allowed inside. Instead they traveled in the mountains in China. They had some tape-players that were operated manually, with messages on, and they handed out pamphlets in addition to playing the messages for people. The areas in which they were moving were restricted areas, and the police finally arrested them:

*“But it was in the name of God, you know, it was great that we had to suffer a bit...”*

She laughs with an ironic expression. Then she adds seriously:

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<sup>49</sup> The Baptist Church practises the baptism of grown-ups.

*“But I did learn a lot, though.”*

They had been about ten people altogether, and it had been *“a very strong atmosphere”* as she puts it: *“because we had the same goals and stuff”*. Expressing irony, as well as presenting an evaluation of the atmosphere as *“strong”* represents a move from matter of fact narration, into more explicit reflection and evaluation. She reflects on the events of that time, as well as on the reflections she remembers having at that time. This had been a time where she started having doubts, she tells me.

In her story this period of growing doubt becomes a turning point. From a more factual explanation of what she had been doing and where she had been going, she now puts more emphasis on her reflection upon events. This is accompanied with a slight stutter: she pauses more frequently, as if groping for the right words to use.

*“We had a very strong leader who reacted intensely if the others did not believe “the right way”. So I started... I guess it was about then with my last... the last time... I started to feel that it might not be the right thing of me to do, that is was not quite me, that I was doing something that was not right for me. I went from feeling that I had to move on and on and on and become more and more extreme, to feeling that I am doing things because others expect it from me, things that I feel are too extreme. But I had already moved very far, I was a pretty extreme Christian, in a pretty extreme way...”*

Marit talks about a growing sense of the activities she was engaging in as *“not right for her”*; *“it was not me”*. To do what is *“right for oneself”* is an issue she returns to frequently in this conversation as well as in every conversation we have later on. These reflections are always accompanied with the issue of others, as here: *“feeling that I am doing things because others expect it from me”*. This is another example of how *“others”* are portrayed as agents exerting pressure. A lot of Marit’s strategies and thoughts seem to be directed towards finding the right way to relate to the experience of pressure, without *“becoming extreme”* or *“difficult”* as she puts it. She constantly evaluates what she does or plans to do, emphasizing the importance of doing what is right for her, but also emphasizing the importance of not becoming extreme or difficult. To me her stories seem to portray the walking on a tightrope, where her every move is a balancing act.

Through her stories Marit conjures up a world of constant tension: what she considers to be right for her is not necessarily what others consider to be right for her, and she struggles to come to terms with this, finding the right balance. Finding the right balance is a major theme

in everything that Marit tells me about. In thematizing balance, she is part of a larger pattern that I discerned when looking at the stories of my informants in general. The way she goes about thematizing issues of balance, however, has to do with the specific challenges posed by her specific situation in life, one that is constantly changing, demanding that the issue of balance is constantly revisited.

### 8.2.3 'Before', 'after' and continuity

In Marit's story a difference can be observed after the turning point is introduced. Her story begins to interweave with reflections to a much greater extent, as comparisons between 'then' and 'now' are being made:

*"it is strange to think about today, because today I feel like the totally opposite. I feel very little extreme in all areas of life. But this was the beginning of my withdrawal, I think. I went back to Norway, went to school, would hang out in Christian environments, but this time it was much less extreme environments. I became more and more preoccupied with other thoughts. I studied a lot, Norwegian history among other things. I became fascinated with philosophy, but socially my whole network was in the Christian environment, so moving from having only Christian friends to standing on my own two feet was a difficult process. A lonely process. I felt very lonely when giving it up, realizing that I did not fit in the Christian environment anymore."*

The before and after is also a story of moving from what she conceives of as extremism to non-extremism. The concept "*extreme*" is frequently used by Marit, as a very negatively charged concept. Compared to how she used to be, she reports feeling like "*the totally opposite*" today. The period in between is described as a time of growing up, becoming educated, and as a time where she started to "*think for herself*", as opposed to just going along with the crowd. Marit describes the time of growing doubt as moving from "*believing the right thing according to somebody else*" to "*finding your own truths*". She stops hanging out in the Christian environment, and spends a lot of time alone. Regarding the process of questioning old truths and searching for alternatives, she reports feeling even more alone during this time. Then she starts a story about the rebuilding of her life, in the sense of establishing new social relationships as well as establishing new ways of thinking about and relating to life:

*"As time has passed, I have built up other relations; I have grown more confident. I dare to think and live the way I feel is right, regardless of what others might think. I have become more independent. It has been... It is strange to look back at, because my whole life had been about becoming a missionary, everything I did pointed in just that direction. And now I don't have that direction anymore. It is really strange to look back, and to see that I used to walk a path that I did not... that used to be so alien to me. But it has probably given me a lot of valuable experience, but also a bit of weird stuff, though."*

I ask Marit: "Do you still believe in a God, or something today? Do any of your beliefs from that time linger?"

*"Not like then. Now I don't feel.... Well, it was very real to me, that I had God and Jesus, but maybe God even more, it was a real thing. That God has created the universe; that God has opinions and thoughts about how things are supposed to be. I don't have that anymore. Christianity gave very clear answers regarding what God is like; black and white thinking. But I am probably colored by that environment, by the fact that I have been a Christian, that you think Heaven and earth and God... you... But now I am more thinking that God and human beings and everything is one, in a way. That human beings are part of God, that is how I am thinking now. That everything living is part of God, and that everything living means anything that can sprout and blossom, being part of the divine."*

Marit tells me that she still relates to God in a sense, but instead of understanding this God as a being separate from the human world, instead of understanding this God as someone passing judgment on us, she sees God as *part of* human beings: "everything is one, in a way". She says that the God she used to relate to could be described "to a certain extent": through the writings in the Bible. But the God she relates to now, is not to be found in scriptures, dogmas or myths, but "inside her". This emphasis on oneness is yet another pattern I recognize the other stories told by my informants. Sjørup discerns the same patterns when analyzing people's stories about religious experience, to the extent that she chose to name her book "Oneness" (1998).

Relocating the divine from outside of her to inside of her seems to place the divine in a realm that has implications for how Marit is able to talk about God. She tells me that she can no longer talk about who God is by referring to scriptures or the claims of outside authorities, like ministers and priests. Talking about God now poses other challenges:

*“It is pretty vague, it is hard to put it in words, the divine that I sense now compared to the divine I knew before. The divine is more in everything, it is not limited, it has no limitations in room or space or in.... It is beyond my ability to comprehend. I can vaguely sense it in... I feel that I, and I always have sensed it in nature and in myself and in the meeting with other people. Even as a Christian I thought that the task of my life was to become myself as much as possible. I thought very specifically so, and today I am thinking that this is pretty weird. Because that is more a Buddhist way of thinking. But I remember very specifically, that I thought that I had to become Marit as much as possible, that is, what I had a potential of being. Today I think about it in terms of self development. But I have always thought that way. Also that we have... At that time I thought one could sense God in nature. But today I think that God is nature”.*

Marit reported a radical break between ‘then’ and ‘now’, a move from what she conceives of as extremism to non-extremism. In this last paragraph, though, she introduces a different element to describe the same processes: She tells me that she has *always* thought that she “*had to become Marit as much as possible*”. She reflects on how she actually held a “*Buddhist way of thinking*” before ever knowing Buddhism. Events that were first narrated by way of a turning point are here being narrated with an emphasis on continuity. Not as opposed to what she has said before, but as an additional aspect of the events narrated. When telling me that she sees God as nature now, and pointing out that she has always sensed God in nature, she is communicating a turning point (God in nature as opposed to God as nature) and simultaneously she communicates continuity, as she reports that the association between nature and God has been there all along.

By doing so, something I find very interesting happens. After I had finished all my interviews, and after I had transcribed them, my first impression was that the stories lacked turning points. But, when going through the conversations in further detail, as with Marit’s story, I suddenly noticed that there is indeed a turning point in her story. She was a Christian, but she turned her back to the Christian environment, a change she describes as dramatic. The changes she reports also imply a change regarding narrative structure. *What* she told me, as well as *the way* she narrated, demonstrated a turning point. How could I miss out on it?

Part of the answer is introduced in the former quote: right after telling me about the changes that took place in her life, she starts another parallel story about continuity. She focuses on what she perceives as continuity through the whole process. Following this line of reasoning,



the time ‘before’ and the time ‘after’ is reintroduced as a continuum. She tells me that she has always thought about the goal of her life as being one of developing herself, as being one of realizing her own potentials. She tells me that she has always associated God with nature. She tells me that she has always engaged in a Buddhist way of thinking, long before knowing Buddhism. This way of narrating had the effect of smoothing out what was first presented as a turning point. The turning point was glossed over most efficiently, and combined with the fact that continuity becomes the dominating theme from the moment it is introduced, it left me with the impression of turning points as absent.

This emphasis on continuity is something Marit has in common with my other informants. And yet, her story shows how continuity is conjured up in relation to her specific concerns in life.

#### 8.2.4 Handling pressure of conformity

Marit returns to the issue of other people, conformity and life-choices, questioning the reasons for engaging in any practice that people around her are engaging in:

*“Why do we live like this, why do we eat like this, why do we live together as partners, why do we get a family, why do we get a lot of things. Why do I have to celebrate Christmas the way everyone expects me to do, why do I have to go to the mountains when it is Easter...”*

I add: “Or go downtown because it is Saturday...”

*“Yes, just that! I think I might become very strange as time passes, in the eyes of the world at large... Because I no longer bother to do stuff just because one is supposed to. I simply don’t bother anymore. It is over, sort of. But it is also important to me to adjust. I don’t want to become difficult to deal with. But being aware, being conscious about my motives for choosing, so that I know it, whenever I am engaging in something because it is expected from me or to make someone happy... or to create less friction and difficulties. That I am aware of it, at least. It is important to claim your own space, to live out yourself, and to find a balance. I believe that I am more aware of that now than I used to before.*

“Do you feel you have achieved a balance between doing what’s right for you, and adjusting to others?”

*“No, but I am working on it. Maybe I am working especially much with it now, because people that I am close to happen to have other opinions than I do. Before I*

*used to do things just to satisfy others, but now I feel a greater need for not just giving in...*

“You feel pressured?”

*“Yes. Right now it is about my partner. He is moving in a different direction than I am, and I am no longer able to live according to his expectations. I feel very strongly that I don’t want to lose myself to another person. That is very important to me. I feel I have given up myself so much in relation to society, expectations, work, what to become and do in life, whom to be. It is so important to me that I no longer continue along that path. Nothing must prevent me from becoming free. I defend that a lot more now. That is the task of my life. I cannot give it up, sort of, it is not possible. I used to think that no, I cannot allow myself just to stop, I have to show consideration. You have to be nice. Not create trouble. This has changed a lot lately, but it creates a bit of problems... Now I can bang the table a lot more, because I feel that otherwise I am just committing a very drawn-out suicide...*

Marit returns to the issue of balancing pressure from others with the doing what is right for her. She reports that she and her partner are moving in different directions, questioning whether she can go on living like this. She describes the process as “*losing herself*”, and expresses concern about having “*given up herself so much in relation to society, expectations, work, what to become and do in life*”. Marit is in a phase deciding whether she has to make some serious change. The next time I talk to her, she is no longer living with this man<sup>50</sup>.

Not living life according to her own beliefs, not making choices that are firmly grounded in the sense of being “*her*” is something Marit talks about as “*drawn-out suicide*”. Whatever Marit perceives as constituting the essence of “*her*”, it is portrayed as under constant threat from other people and their explicit or implicit imposing of wishes. It seems like Marit can constitute a threat to “*herself*”, as she may actually “*lose herself*”, and inadvertently “*commit a drawn out suicide*”, if making the wrong choices. However, she has taken a stand; she does not want her own annihilation. Through Marit’s stories, I get the impression of a person standing against the world, but by no means weak or helpless:

*“I feel a kind of power, a power inside me that just wants to go ahead, sort of, that cannot compromise. Generally I give in too much, so I feel that the things that*

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<sup>50</sup>By introducing relationships as a theme, Marit adds to another pattern: I observed that the women I spoke to thematized challenges related to having a partner, and/or issues pertaining to gender, in ways that the men never did. Gullestad makes the same observation when analysing life-stories. She claims that this is a pattern arising because women experience greater challenges in relation to being a woman than men do in relation to being a man. She says that women thematized their gender, men do not, because “masculinity is an implied norm, perceived as “neutral”” (ibid 1996:228).

*are important to me, I just have to stick to them.”*

Marit pauses. Getting to where she is today, a place where she is “*no longer so concerned about what other people think and mean*” has taken a long time, and a lot of work, she reports. It is not just something that she has easily chosen or easily done, in fact, the struggle is an ongoing one, reflected by the content of what she tells me, as well as the fact that she keeps returning to these issues over and over again, with a fierce intensity through all our conversations. *What* she tells me is underlined by *the manner* in which it is told, as well as its *frequency*.

*“Actually I have been working consciously with this: I have been very concerned about what other people think about me, what I may do and what I may not, and I have become ill a lot because of it. Burnt out, because I struggle all the time to be good enough, so I am being open now, quite consciously. Maybe the moment you starts to live very openly you feel that you become stronger, I feel it has made me much stronger. To me it is not dangerous anymore. Sometimes you have to be a bit extreme if you are very much out on one side, to get back to the center. There is quite a bit of stuff in my life that has been so suppressed, so I have had to go in the opposite direction, sort of “here I am, this is me, and I am like this”, and maybe I have been a bit extreme in that way, to become free. I feel that it has made me stronger. People have to take me for who I am. I don’t fit in the frame... So I might as well...”*

Marit pauses, and I add, “Dig it?”

*“Yes, just taking it all the way out. I don’t work, and I don’t do this and I don’t do that, and there is a lot of stuff that does not fit in my life, compared to the expectations and limitations of society. It is not a big problem for me anymore, but it used to be. I tried to fit in. It has been a process of liberation.”*

Marit talks about how she has worked, and is still working “*to become free*” as she puts it. She is not telling me a story about processes that are finished. She is in the middle of her liberation project, facing many challenges:

*“There are a lot of big choices in my life where I don’t feel certain at all. It is very unclear to me what I should go for. It is often easier to see afterwards whether one made the wise choices or not.”*

Marit does not work, and lives on a disability pension because of her bad back. Contrary to the official rhetoric, where work is emphasized as central to creating meaning in a person’s life, and central for people’s ability to develop their resources and thrive, Marit tells a story of

work as being something that used to destroy her life. The fact that I have known about Marit for twenty years adds something to my understanding of the stories she tells me now. Without the knowledge that I have gained over these twenty years, I might have thought that Marit's emphasis on work as ruining her life was at least partly a strategy applied to survive the fact that she cannot work (due to her back). As my knowledge of Marit extends beyond the time of fieldwork, I have a different perspective. I know that Marit has had a clear strategy to rid herself of work for years, as she has conceived of work as the very opposite of being able to develop oneself, the very opposite of thriving, and as deeply troublesome. The time dimension adds to my understanding of what Marit is telling me. I know that the issues she raises are not new issues, not just as story she accidentally produces in the conversation we are having, her claims are not *ad hoc* constructions, but rather recurring themes and challenges in her life.

### 8.2.5 Turning tables

Marit may not work today, but she is certainly active. She rejects the notion of wage labor as a prerequisite for developing oneself, but she embraces the notion of developing oneself as most important. Marit turns the tables by embracing the value of development, but posing wage labor as a basic hindrance for development. Again, at one level she expresses the acceptance of a general value: the importance of developing yourself. But her ideas of how this can be done, constitute a total rejection of the rhetoric of wage labor as a means of doing so<sup>51</sup>. In fact, Marit expresses critique of what she finds a single-track-minded society:

*“I think it is very much an individual matter if you need a job to survive mentally. I think that society is very much single-track-minded. If you don't do as expected, you are doing something wrong, sort of. To me society is a burning house, going in the wrong direction, where there is too little flexibility and too little room for the differences of people. I think a lot of people are struggling to keep their masks, to fit in, to be what is expected in society. That is not good. There should be more openness and room for different ways of being. I am quite critical towards the structure of society.”*

“Are there any aspects of society that you are more critical towards than others?” I ask.

*“The enormous development thing and consumerism; to be the greatest, to have the most, to get the most. It is like a factory. Not that we should not go to school, I believe we should. But it is very much like, you have to go to this and that*

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<sup>51</sup>The ideas of wage labour as The Way of creating a meaningful life is also challenged in Øians studies of young, unemployed people.

*school, and then you should... it is like a factory. People struggle a lot more now with more work, more working hours, families are split up a lot more, there is more absence, old people and children and grown-ups are divided, going to different places. The way I experience the world, I believe that there is our type of society on the one hand, and the simpler and poorer on the other. They are two extremities. I believe the middle way might be the best. That you don't have to struggle yourself silly to survive, but that there are values – time and happiness and togetherness, I believe strongly in that. I feel we live in a sick world; you cannot eat the food or drink the water without becoming ill, almost. And the ways that the animals are treated before they are slaughtered. Things that used to be natural, that the cows went outdoors and grazed, that you milked them and collected eggs, there was more harmony. Now there is industrialization, there are 25 hens to each square meter, and they are being manipulated to lay as many eggs as possible. It is sick. It is not the way things are meant to be. We are trying to run everything, stuff that is not meant to be run. I believe a lot of people feel very much controlled and not feeling comfortable with it. I would like things to turn around”.*

Marit does not pause here, her narrative continues directly into the following:

*“At the same time Roar (a teacher at KTLBS) says that it is a help for us to see that things are extreme, because then you see the craziness of it. You see the emptiness in it. It is so absurd to yearn for more and more money, to have as many things as possible, cars, boats... to me it is just weird. To me those things are of no value. But if I had not experienced these things happening in society, I would not have experienced the senselessness of it that strongly. So maybe I should be grateful. I see how crazy things are, and all the things that do not provide happiness or meaning.”*

The reason why I have broken her flowing narrative in two pieces is because something happens here that I want to draw attention to. Her tightly interwoven reflections on the state of the world end with a wish: *“I would like things to turn around”*. If her exclamation had ended there, my impression might have been a certain degree of hopelessness: the world a lost cause, going down, and Marit's option reduced to one of wishing things were different. But before I get any opportunity to sense hopelessness, Marit refers to something she has learnt at the meditational gatherings. The state of the world is pointed out as something that can be seen as assisting us in the process of learning, in the process of developing. If things had not been *“crazy”* she might not have realized the value of other aspects of being, she tells me. The *“craziness of things”* is transformed from an obstacle to a tool that accelerates

“*development and insight*”. By this act of transformation Marit seems to reopen the world as a place of possibilities, a place where she has the option of bringing about change.

### 8.2.6 Extracting, annotating and ‘the stable core’

Marit’s reference to Buddhist philosophy is an example of how she tentatively tries out aspects of it in relation to her life. She tells me that she has no intention of buying any package of beliefs, and her stories elaborate on how the elements she tries out are not picked out randomly. She finds “*the craziness of the world*” quite disturbing, she tells me. Society is “*a burning house*”, one she is actually living her life within, so she has to find ways of relating without getting burnt. Marit is engaging in processes implying hard work, and much is at stake. In fact, it implies so much work that she is incapable of combining it with wage labor. Marit works fulltime on life, on understanding it, on relating to it, on coping at a very basic level. There is room for nothing more. Marit does not simply encounter new ideas and jump on them uncritically:

*“I have tried out a lot of different things, but I have this “main thing” that I put stuff into, that does not change that much. It does change, but not enormously. Rather, it develops slowly. I think it is interesting and fun to be many different places, and hear a lot of different stuff. But it is very seldom that I think that “this I have to bring into my life”. It is not like I take it in, and throw everything else out. I feel pretty stable regarding what I want to be, in there, in that core. But I am open to both acquiring as well as dispelling if that turns out to be the best thing. It would be very strange if I threw away all the thoughts that I have built up regarding what is right for me. It takes a lot for me to say “no, now I want to do something completely different”.”*

All the conversations that Marit and I have, over a period of two years, have so much in common that it is hard to see which conversation was first, and which conversation was last when looking at my transcripts. This stability lends support to Marit’s claim of a “*stable core*”. New events may have taken place in her life, but when it comes to the processes of elaboration, how things are interpreted and reinterpreted in the light of new experience, there are obviously some stabilizing factors at work. Marit keeps coming back to some themes, some issues that seem to be of vital, and continuous importance to her. This repetitiveness is an aspect of her life-stories that I could have lost out on, if I had not integrated the time dimension, which allowed me to see how the same themes are repeated. By integrating the

time dimension I am referring to the fact that we had several conversations over two years, as well as the fact that I have known about Marit since we were in our late teens. True, if I had spent more time with her, if I had kept following her up over a lifetime, chances are I would have perceived a greater degree of change. Indeed, Marit herself points out development and change as something that actually takes place. This does not eliminate the fact of stabilizing factors at work, manifesting through her ever recurring themes. Change does not seem to be brought about easily.

Later in our conversation Marit returns to the issue of hard work and struggle, as a central characteristic of seeking:

*“There is a lot of tough work to be done until you become free, to me it seems like very few are free. Even people who have been working terribly hard with their lives for a long, long time. Most people do struggle. I think it almost seems like we are cursed.... I don’t see any easy way out of it. I don’t understand the meaning of everything, I can understand that there is potential for change in difficulties, but honestly, there’s gotta be limits!”*

Marit moves back and fourth between elaborations upon potentials for change, and the resiliency she encounters when working to bring about such change. In fact, her explicit emphasis on transformation constitutes a contrast to the fact that she keeps returning to the very same issues over and over again, year after year.

### **8.2.7 Bringing about change**

When talking about working towards change, her narrative revolves mainly around issues of transforming the way you *look* at things, as in seeing *“the craziness of the ways of the world”* as a blessing instead of a curse. So I follow up the issue by asking about another aspect of change. Marit has already expressed concern about the treatment of animals, along with concerns about the consumer society, and moved directly to talking about how this “craziness” can be seen as a tool for creating understanding. I return to the issue of change, and ask her if she, apart from experimenting with different *perspectives* on ‘the craziness’, does anything to change the craziness itself? She talked about animals being treated badly. Does this mean she is a vegetarian, for instance?

*“I am not a vegetarian, but I never make food with meat myself. But I am not consistent. I don’t preach to others, trying to make them eat less meat. I do it in a hidden manner, though. And I do believe that the right thing would be to eat less*

*meat. But it is very mission-like to go out in the world and live like that, to come to somebody's house, and say that "no thank you, I don't want that food, because there is meat in it", sort of. It is a little... There are things that are more important. But I have done a bit of research into how animals in the industrialized countries are being treated, and it is horrible. It is not about not eating animals, it more about what a terrible time they have been having. The production of chicken and eggs is terrible, just extreme. So I do live alternatively in the sense that I don't do what most people do. I don't have a job. I just live. Simply."*

You seem very conscious about that, I respond.

*"It is conscious, but it has also become... I have sort of always been that way."*

Again Marit creates continuity: *I have sort of always been that way*". She also repeats the theme of not being extreme and not preaching to others. Marit continues:

*"So in a way it has become part of my lifestyle that even if I do have an extra amount of money, I feel that it is wrong to spend more than what I need on things... But again, one is not alone in this world; one has to relate to others. And when I am living with a person, I have to relate to the way the other person believes that life is supposed to be lived. He has a very different standard of consumption and opinions on how time should be spent, money and food and stuff. I guess I am sacrificing a bit of my own conviction to be able to coexist peacefully with others. It is not important to me to be extreme, but it is important to me that I can do what I think is important. For instance, it is a problem for me that I don't want to be seen from the outside as.... I do think that it is the best thing not to eat meat, but, I don't want others to perceive me as extreme. I guess I am trying to "tone down" my lifestyle in relationship to the world, maybe, especially, my family. Because it only causes trouble. You could say that I compromise at my own expense, for the sake of my relationship to others. When going out to eat I'd rather go somewhere not very expensive, and I'd rather do things that do not cost that much. But we go on trips to the cabin with his friends and stuff, and it is so enormous, there are supposed to be giant steaks and enormous amounts of alcohol, it is sort of, just taking it all the way out. I did join in, but it did not feel good. It was just exhausting. It was supposed to be such a blast, but to me it wasn't. It was supposed to be so stylish and expensive all the way, that I felt it was not good. When meeting others I do what is expected of me, I am not a person fighting on the barricades. But that did not feel right."*



Marit is back to her main theme: other people as representing challenge and pressure, versus her need to do what is right for her, but at the same time not being extreme.

Marit makes frequent reference to her Christian background, a time she considers herself as being extreme. She tells me she does not want to go there again. By making these references, she conjures up a before and an after, elaborating on her experience of change, making points she keeps returning to when elaborating upon new events. The events she narrates are not just about the past. They are about the present and the future as well, as she evokes past events to elaborate on, and deal with, present challenges and dilemmas.

Marit returns to the metaphor of society as a burning house. I ask her if there is something in particular that has made her think of society as a burning house, or if it has been more of a gradual development. By asking this question, I am introducing the theme of continuity versus change quite explicitly. Marit's answer picks up the theme of continuity, and she adds even more urgency to what is at stake for her:

*"I guess I have always felt like an outsider. It might have more to do with me, my upbringing. I guess that from my teens I have felt that this was a strange place; I do not quite know how to find my place in it. I believe that from my early teens I felt this was a very strange place, I did not quite know how to find my place. I had to get away, I could not take it, I could not bear it! This was probably what triggered my seeking Christianity, my seeking towards other cultures. I did not want to live in Norway; I wanted to live somewhere else. Presently, however, my greatest challenge is living in this society, my own country and my family, being able to manage this, that is the greatest challenge. Relating to my own family and society, finding the right way to do it so that I do not get destroyed".*

She evokes heavily charged metaphors: the burning house, becoming destroyed, drawn out suicide. To me it seems like her very survival is at stake.

Marit tells me that she tends to compromise her own values for the sake of making relationships to others run smoothly, in spite of the perceived need to live according to her own values and beliefs. This dilemma has been an imperative behind Marit's seeking out people and places where she does not have to face this compromise to such an excruciating extent. Her ability to do so, is something she points out as a strength:

*"I believe my greatest strength has been finding environments where I feel more like the others. To me that is good. To find places where I can talk as who I am*

*without being a deviant, that is good. The most meaningful thing I do is talking with people, being places where there is an atmosphere and acceptance for the things that I stand for. Where I do not have to defend myself all the time. That I don't live like others, or do the normal things, right. It used to be a greater problem for me before, when I was more insecure regarding what was right for me. But living here in Oslo, it is not an issue. It is not important. And I feel that is good."*

"You felt more pressure living at smaller places?"

*"Yes, I got it from everywhere. At home, and at work. Maybe very much at work. Everybody telling you that you are supposed to get a family, that you are supposed to get a house, where you are supposed to go on holiday. Constant expectations in relation to things that are not part of my life, that are not part of my reality. Things I feel I don't fit in with. I felt like a total outsider when the others talked about their lives. Their lives were not my life, sort of. It can be nice in smaller amounts, but if your whole social network is like that, it becomes very lonely in the end. And it was very, very important to me to take care of my work, and to be accepted by my family, too. Now it is not that important anymore. I feel more free. It is the sense of being able to stand firmly grounded in yourself and say, this is good enough! This is me, and I am good enough, and I don't have to try to be anything else. It is very, very important to me that I never yield there, it is very important. I feel that society does not make things easier for me, rather to the contrary."*

Marit tells me about strength, about her ability to take active steps to handle her life in the best possible manner. She tells me how she has been able to establish new social networks, building up a better life. The activities and environments that she seeks out represent an alternative to her, as these are places where she does not feel bombarded with expectations she has no intention or desire of fulfilling. The Buddhist groups have been places she reports as being allowed to be herself, not being told what to do and where to go, not being confronted with being deviant. In fact, she *is* no longer a deviant: here she meets people who seem to share her most important concerns and interests, she tells me. This aspect of her narrative has resonance with my own first encounter with KTL. I sensed a freedom as nobody confronted me with what I felt as the trivia of life. I could relate to what Marit told me, in the sense that if you don't share basic values and interests with the people you surround yourself with, relating to them may become a confrontation, where your position is easily reduced to one of negating, or as Marit says – *"defending your life"*.

Marit keeps talking about the importance of “*feeling what is right*”. I ask her to tell me more about that. Is it a sensation in the body, or what does she mean?

*“Maybe it is both in my head and my body – my emotional life. I may be weird, but I can often sense if something is right or not... Let’s say that I have had a meeting with somebody, and things have happened and things have been said. Then I... and I often do... sit at the end of the day and think about what the day has been like, and then I think; “no, Marit, you do that differently another time” sort of. One can hope to become a wiser person as time passes on, being observant regarding what happens, because I have this feeling inside about what is right and what is wrong. But not always. Some times, like when making serious choices, like choosing a partner, it is very big, and very serious, and there is not just one element to be taken into consideration, but many. You may be on the right track, but something may be leading in the wrong direction in the relationship, right? Especially lately, I have been pondering what in the world.... If I were to ask the wisest person on earth what would be the right thing to do... I feel I don’t have a clue regarding the big questions in life. There are so many elements involved. But when it comes to the little things I can often feel what is right and wrong, or what will make me move on, or pull me back, or keep me stagnant or whatever. There I have become very... cynical is the wrong word. But it is important to me that I don’t stagnate. It is such an imperative; it is a question of life and death to move on.*

*Sometimes I can feel that one thing is right, and then it turns out it wasn’t. Like Christianity. For the longest time I chose it, but finally I found out that it was not right. It is important to me to walk the path that I feel is right according to my inner self. That there is resonance. Like before... there are many elements involved in it, but to give everything to my work, I felt for years how wrong that was. I was not able to blossom before I gave up work. If there are more skeletons in the closet I will find them, because I want to move on with my life, it is very, very, very important to me. It has become stronger in the last years. I don’t settle for things that are not right for me anymore, maybe I did that more before. I made quite a few compromises. I just have to sort of... move on.... Not in an extreme manner, but I have to move on. I don’t want to take enormous steps. But it is important that the steps that I take... that I do take steps! Not like “I have to finish fast to get somewhere”, but it is more about constantly doing as much as I can. That I am not lazy or chicken, but do what I am able to. That I am not steered by fear or expectations. That is a big thing in my life.”*

Marit emphasizes that she does not want to make choices based upon fear or expectations, but to “walk the path that I feel is right according to my inner self”. There has to be “resonance” she says. And: “I was not able to blossom until I gave up work”. It is imperative to her not to “stagnate”, moving on is necessary. The necessity of “moving on”, and “not stagnate”, is yet another theme in her narratives. She tells me it is a “question of life and death”. Marit’s emphasis on “walking her path” is about continuity and coherence. She says that her choices should arise from, and be in touch with, her “inner core”. Her “inner core” is not a static realm, what she has felt was right has changed throughout the years, she reports. But still, the existence of what she refers to as an inner core introduces elements of resiliency, making the processes of integrating new thoughts very time consuming. She reports experiencing change, by way of telling me how she is a different person now as compared to before. But she also tells a story of this change as not coming about easily. In fact, she points out the necessity of moving on with “small steps”, to preserve the experience of “her” as being involved.

### **8.2.8 Tools for transformation**

I ask Marit, how did you first encounter Buddhism?

*“Well, I knew about Buddhism through my studies. But that kind of knowledge does not portray Buddhism correctly. It was on the internet that I found information that I found relevant. I lived in [ ] at that time. There was a Buddhist group having meetings, and there was a course that had already begun, so I could not go to that course, but I talked a bit to the guy who was the leader of the group. He told me that among other things they were reading “the book on living and dying”. So I bought it and read it, and found it just great. So I checked out more on the internet to find out more about Buddhism and how it is practiced in Norway, what kind of different groups there were and stuff. I was allowed to come to one meeting to see what it was like, because I wanted to start attending a course myself. I went to that one meeting, and decided to start going to that group. But we moved, so I never got around to it. [ ] Then we moved again, to Oslo, so I started to find out what alternatives existed here in Oslo, and KTLBS was the closest”.*

Closest, you mean geographically? I ask, knowing that her apartment, in which we are sitting during our conversation, is not very far from the Rinzai Zen center (where KTLBS had their courses at the time).

*”No, because it was a group belonging to KTL that I had attended where I used to live. I went to the beginner’s course at KTLBS, and it went straight.... It went*

*straight home! I really like that teacher. He talks directly about life. It is not just theoretical mumbo jumbo, it is about how one can live life to the fullest. How to live in the manner best for yourself as well as others. So after I started that course I have become very much engaged. I have read a lot, and I have visited the other Buddhist groups in Oslo, and I have been other places looking around.”*

“*It went straight home*” Marit says. Again she emphasizes how Buddhist philosophy attracts her, because the teacher “*talks directly about life.*” She does not see the teachings as merely theoretical elaborations, but as something that can be used in her own life, and thereby making it a better life, she tells me. She has a very pragmatic approach.

*“I believe that Buddhism is something you have to practice, to see the positive potential of it. If you just look at how Buddhism is practiced, the cultural stuff, that there is an altar, etc... well... but if you really go into it, you see the potential it has for developing yourself. It really shocked me when I realized that. It hit me right at home at the right time. To me Buddhism used to be a religion, but after this realization it became a way of looking at life, something that can help me on the right way and further. Before I had only read concepts that I did not understand the practical significance of.”*

Buddhism as presented through her academic studies was something she did not find relevant, compared to the knowledge she developed by searching for information on the internet, reading about Buddhism as presented by practicing Buddhists, or attending Buddhist meditations. She reports a growing understanding of the practical significance of Buddhism, which is one she points out as being about the potential of developing yourself, the potential for change and transformation.

### **8.2.9 “Coming back to myself” and the challenge of “others”**

As Marit says that she has been other places to take a look, I ask which places she has been to.

*“There is another Buddhist group that is Tibetan, too<sup>52</sup>. But I have spent more time at the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. I have been there just as much as I have been to KTLBS.”*

Marit tells me that she feels she is “*more together with herself*” at the course at KTLBS, whereas at the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order she feels that she is “*more together with others*”. This is not a Norwegian expression that has been badly translated. In fact, I have never heard anybody use the expression “*more together with myself*” before. Knowing

<sup>52</sup> Ole Nydalen, *The Diamond Way*. They are not members of the Buddhist society.

Marit, the expression becomes charged with meaning: “*being together with myself*” is not synonymous with being lonely or alone. In fact, she has always reported, and shown through her withdrawals on social occasions, great need for spending time alone. She values it, and goes to great lengths to preserve a space of her own.

Marit tells me about the courses at KTLBS as being of great value to her. However, she says that the Western Buddhist Order is smaller, and she finds it easier to participate, in the sense of sharing her own thoughts. At the beginners course at KTLBS she feels that she can sit and listen, and then go home. Then she has learnt a lot. But she feels she has not contributed the same way, she says. Being able to contribute in the conversation is something she emphasizes as important, and as the year passes, Marit becomes more and more involved in the Western Buddhist Order. Having quoted Marit on this, I have to point out that the courses at KTLBS do open up for conversation, but it is, as Marit says, a lot more people there. Marit does not feel comfortable talking when there are a lot of people present. What is more, when there are a lot of people present, there will be less time for each person to talk. In general, small gatherings open up for a different kind of conversation than large gatherings.

Marit tells me about her plans of attending different courses, and about retreats she wants to go to. Among other things she wants to go to the summer course at KSL.

*“I feel that this is something I will be doing for a long time. It is not just a whim. I feel I have found a way to develop myself in a healthy manner. But a lot of it is... I mean, I have been in the alternative environment a lot, long before I encountered Buddhism, so I don’t feel that it is much different. I feel it is just a continuation of my path of development. Really. I don’t think I will ever be fettered, I have been fettered before, so if somebody should try telling me that “this is you”, I would react pretty strongly. To me, anything that can move me further along the right path, I am open towards it. I believe that quite a bit of other alternative stuff might be just as rewarding, maybe, but of course, one does not have the capacity to be everywhere all the time. One has to make choices. I imagine that I will be going to a lot of different courses. You have heard about Alternativt Nettverk? There will always be things popping up that I find exciting, that I want to learn more about. Anything dealing with self development, understanding yourself and the world better.*

*I would like a little of everything. Some theoretical knowledge, some knowledge about life lived, and ethics, a good mixture. It is of vital importance that I feel emotionally engaged. If I did not, I would tire pretty fast. It is important to feel*

*that what I learn has resonance in my own life. That what is being taught is something that I can practice and use in my own life. What the correct concepts are, or how it relates historically can be interesting in small dosages, but if it becomes merely theoretical, then I feel it has no longer relevance for my own life. I need things that make me able to change myself, where what I hear and learn can be used for moving forward. I am not only interested in understanding things and having knowledge, I need to make it part of my life, and that life then can change in the right direction. There are many elements. Like feeling engaged, that you are part of an environment, that you receive teachings that talk about life, how to live life, but also the theoretical knowledge.”*

A lot of what Marit says, are in terms of “*taking her life back*”, or about her ownership to her own life. She wants to have a life in which she is *engaged*, a life that she feels as a *part of*. There seems to be an alternative there: not being engaged in her own life, not being part of her own life. The metaphor of “*drawn out suicide*” refers to ways of living life that will cut her out of the equation. Seeking out environments where she feels she can talk about what matters to her, where she does not feel pressured, is also about finding environments in which she can be a *part*. She points out the importance of being able to *participate*. Through participation and dialogue with people showing an interest in the issues she finds important, she seems to create links between herself and others. Through meditational techniques and philosophies on interconnection, she can be understood as cultivating the sense of *being part of*. What Marit is engaging in, can be seen as processes of integration, processes of embedding herself. To do so, she applies many strategies. She actively seeks out people and places, she engages in bodily techniques, philosophies, as well as other activities. I ask Marit how often she meditates, and she answers:

*“I meditate every day. What I feel most is that meditation is to concentrate myself in me. From being very confused, I come back to myself. It makes me more focused when meeting others afterwards, meeting life and problems and the world, I have a more healthy perspective on things.”*

Marit talks about meditation in terms of “*coming back to myself*”, she talks about becoming “*more focused*”. This is something she points out as improving her ability to cope with others. Again, she is back to one of her basic themes – the challenge of relating to others.

When elaborating upon how she goes about meditating, Marit returns to the issue of others once more:

*“At the Western Buddhist Order we have learnt a very concrete meditation. You start breathing in and out and counting to ten. Then you count before you breathe in, you count one, breathe in, breathe out, count to two, breathe in, breathe out. It is a bit demanding, because for some reason you feel that you need breath inside to count! And of course, you don’t. At the third stage you just follow your breath; you merely follow the air down to the lungs and out again. You are present in your breathing all the way. At the fourth stage you try to concentrate at the point where the air enters your body, the tip of the nose, or the mouth. I feel that is a little difficult, because I sense it further up the nose! And then there is the last stage. Often you do the last stage first. You do walking meditation, concentrate on walking. Then you sit down and do compassion meditation. You are supposed to get in touch with your feelings and compassion. If you cannot do so, you try to get in touch with the good feeling of having your hands gathered. You try to get in touch with a good feeling first. That is not easy. First you give love, goodness and compassion towards yourself. Then you think about a friend, and you think that this person is like you, a human being, part of this world and this life, s/he has her/his suffering and joy just like me, and then you try to feel friendliness, love and compassion towards this person. At the third stage you take a neutral person, someone you may have only seen at the store, someone you don’t harbor any positive or negative feelings for, and you repeat the whole procedure. At the fourth stage you take an enemy or a person you don’t like, and do the whole thing over again. Then there is the fifth stage, that is the whole point, and that is, you are not supposed to have less love and compassion towards anybody. We are all alike, and we are all part of the same, and we are all deserving of Metta, to have friendliness, love, compassion. So you imagine that this good feeling spreads all over the room, maybe the people in the room, or the ones you have already been meditating on, they are all supposed to have equally much. Then it spreads from the room all over Oslo and Norway and the world and the universe, all sentient beings, animals, beetles, everything. All sentient beings. It is a practice in compassion. It is not easy. I often start thinking about what the people have done or have not done...*

By visualizing interconnection, by visualizing compassion spreading, Marit tells me that she is working on her relationships to others. She tells me about her relationship to the world and other people as being determined by patterns, and how by reworking these patterns, her relationship to the world and other people can change. Marit can be said to work on transformation by way of establishing new patterns of thinking and behaving.



*“Sometimes I just sit and breathe. But often I just get lost in thought, or what do I know... The time just passes, kind of. I think about what will happen and what has happened or things that I am concerned about, so I don’t do what you are supposed to do when meditating. But I have also learnt that meditation is more about trying. So I think that just bothering to sit down and try is good enough. I don’t want any performance demands associated with it. I am not looking for great experiences, either. I’d rather have none... Like people who can tell that they have floated above the ground, felt extreme heat or other physical sensations, I’d rather have none of that. I don’t want anything that can remind me of what I used to be engaged in. Just smooth practice. Non-eventful. Becoming more present in my own life.”*

Marit reports that an important aim for her is to become “*more present in my own life*”. Meditation is presented as a pragmatic tool for handling life, and she wants it to remain that way. The practice and philosophies she engages in, is about the ordinary things of everyday life, she says.

*“I really like the book by Thich Nhat Hahn, he is concerned with the little things in everyday life. Like peeling an orange with awareness. Doing the dishes with awareness. My head tends to spin all the time, so being present, walking when walking, not just running ahead, but being present and sensing what is happening. Being observant, so I don’t just become an appendix to my own life. But that I actually run the train, sort of. I believe that you become a happier person if you do not think too much “me and my stuff”, but that you can be more open. I believe that is good for you. Being more conscious about your emotional life, not just getting swept away by an angry emotion or frustration, but notice that now I am mad, now something happened that made me mad, and that is my responsibility. I have a hard time understanding how to become free from it, but it is actually me, myself... True, a situation is making me angry, but I am the one getting angry!”*

Marit elaborates on transformation, which she says is about *becoming a happier person*”. She reports having experienced gradual change, as she has moved from thinking about herself as a victim of circumstances to seeing herself as someone who can “*take control*” – to a certain extent:

*“I think that it is possible to become less swept away if one is more conscious about ones choices along the way. I believe I have a greater potential of doing something about things than I used to think. I used to feel a bit more like a victim of circumstances. I guess I feel that I am a bit more... I see the possibilities, I am not*

*able to put it into practice, but I see the potential of taking more control myself. Even though there is something very specific that is happening, I am the one doing the reaction, so I can choose to a greater degree how I want to react. If I really want to hang on to it and think about it every day for a year, being frustrated every day for a year, or whether I want to let it go... It has an enormous significance. If you manage to do so, you will have a very... it is an enormous potential for self-development. I don't know if... I don't think anybody can totally do it, but that you can do it to a greater extent, and I know I have great potentials for working with it. Because I am very easily thrown helter-skelter by events. Something happens, and I react, and then something else happens, and then I react, instead of just letting things happen, and maybe work some more on the way I react to it."*

Self-development, achieving control, being able to see the possibilities and bringing about change, are recurring themes when Marit narrates.

As Marit returns to talking about changing the ways she perceives reality, I raise the issue of change at other levels once more. What are her thoughts about working with people and situations? Like working politically, with charity, whatever? She answers:

*"I believe that if you begin working inwards, you can eventually start doing something outwards. But outwards can be little things like showing compassion in everyday life, like helping a mother with the stroller off the bus, or opening the door, being friendly towards someone working at the deli, or little things like that. I think you can start there. But I believe that along the way it will have greater consequences. I believe there ought to be a wholeness in life, that you live... that you are more environmentally conscious, for instance. That you don't consume so much, for instance. That you live a simpler life. That you don't work so much, maybe, but take the time to live. I believe that for me it would be too great a leap thinking "now I am going to do something good for the world, so now I will engage in some enormous project"... It would be a detour for me, because I would have skipped over myself, the leap would have been too big."*

I notice that Marit uses the expression "*skipped over myself*". Again there is a return to the importance of not "*leaving herself behind*". She does not want to take too great a leap, but small steps, to make certain that she is "part of her own life".

Marit continues:

*“To me it is important to start on the inside, but at the same time doing little things outwards. And to try to get a wholeness into my life, that I don’t engage in charity for one hour a day, and the rest... Now I have some time to spend, and I have been wondering whether I should do something actively outwards. But I found out that I was not ready yet. What I was thinking about, was a breakfast center for alcoholics or drug-addicts. It is a Christian organization, I believe. Where drug-addicts and alcoholics can come and have breakfast and talk. It is a very noble cause that I could very much imagine being a part of. So maybe some other time.*

*But it is a very Tim- consuming process to change... I mean, you change all the time, in your life, but how you change in your way of thinking and being. I feel that things... it takes a lot.... I feel that it takes my attention, that it can be a partner or family and stuff, things that are expected and demanded from you... I feel that it just grabs me, and takes my attention, and I feel like it... I don’t.... I don’t have the energy or bother to do anything beyond what is demanded from me. I don’t think that there is any point forcing it. It would be a wrong priority. I believe one have to feel what is right. It is very... I am very careful about scheduling a life where I am being so good... I have no intentions of being good, I want to be on my way and take care that I don’t move too fast, because that might turn out to be more negative than positive. [ ] I believe that peace starts in yourself. You cannot start out as a peace negotiator until you are at peace with yourself. I know very well some people who do a lot to save the world, but they are total wrecks themselves... When it comes to practical issues regarding saving the world, they have so much frustration and anger that it weights up for all the good they do. One has to start out being good towards oneself, before one is able to be good to others.”*

Marit points out the necessity of adjusting to the fact that *change takes time*. It is important not to move prematurely or too fast, she says, as doing so will only be counterproductive.

She tells me how meditation is not just about sitting in a lotus position on a meditational pillow:

*“Just sitting still in itself can have just as much effect. Like today, I have been sitting by the river, just sitting there. I feel that can be even stronger. If you are aware, that is. If you do things without being aware, then it will not have that much effect. But if you sit there and try to make a meditation of it, so that you are open and see things for what they are, conscious of what one does, then it may be just as good just sitting by the river. You see that everything is moving, nothing is constant. That*

*is life. Nothing is constant. It may be my Christian background, but to have to sit there, like "now you have to sit down and meditate" and "for how long have you been meditating today", sort of, that makes me sick. If it is to become a good deed, and that you are to be measured by it, how much you meditate, whether my practice is good or not, I don't like it. That is Christianity and "how many good deeds have you done today". Are you a good Christian, sort of. To me it is important that it is not based upon deeds, but upon inner authenticity. I do see that one needs a bit of discipline to... if you are only to react upon impulses you'll never get anywhere. It is important to know where you want to go, and to move in that direction. But not having anything pulled down over your head. I don't want that."*

Marit is back to one of her themes again – the pressure of other people. It is important for her that she does not end up in a situation where meditation becomes a duty or a deed, performed to satisfy the demands of others. What she does, she wants to do because she experiences it as good for her, not because someone *"pulls it down over her head"*. Again, Marit is elaborating on the tension she feels between what is right for her, versus the demands of others.

Marit emphasizes the importance of *"inner authenticity"* as opposed to a focus upon *"good deeds"*. She keeps returning to the repulsion she feels towards anything that might remind her of the Christian environment that she once belonged to. Once again, her story demonstrates the way she does not pick at random. If she encounters what she calls *"magical thinking"* or *"hallelujah-attitudes"* at *"alternative places"*, she backs off. She backs off from *"hocus pocus"* she says, as well as *"charismatic stuff"*.

*"I believe that is because I have been there before, I have been an extreme Christian, so anything that has the slightest taste of the extreme, I spit it out."*

Marit has followed commandments enough in her life, and reacts easily against rules, she says. Then she adds that what is right for her, may not be right for others, smoothing out what I otherwise might have interpreted as a critique of rules in general to a statement that is not intended to pass judgment on other ways of thinking:

*"I react easily against rules. But for some people it might be a good thing to have a little structure. I might have had a bit too much structure on things, so I need more freedom. Others might need something different"*.

Different themes are integrated in her narrative: reflecting on her own repulsion towards rules is being integrated with reflections on relativism, and every issue is elaborated upon in

relation to the themes and concerns that are specific to Marit, as for instance others as exerting pressure.

Marit does not just state that rules repulse her. She analyses the issue thoroughly.

*“The way Roar (the teacher) talks, goes right home. But I believe that if I stayed long enough in that environment, it might point towards... Maybe a special kind of practice and a special form of lifestyle, I believe. [ ] I see that systems are very good if you manage to tear yourself free from them. Discipline is good. But not discipline for the sake of discipline. But if it gets a fruitful manifestation, it is good. But I guess that I am a bit too quick with the feeling, where is the pointed finger, sort of. “Is there anybody here telling me what to do...” sort of. Then I become skeptical at once. I am probably overreacting a bit. I don’t believe that... There is a lot of freedom and joy in that philosophy [Buddhism], so I guess I am very quick to sense whether there are any rules or pointed fingers. So it has probably more to do with me than anything else. It is probably because of my extreme Christian background... But it can also be a healthy attitude, as long as one is aware of it. I can become almost childish, like “well, I am certainly not going to do this or that if that is what is expected of me!” But that is not right, either...”*

Marit contemplates the Buddhist groups in which she practices at the time, and wonders whether this, too, can be a pathway into something that might slowly imprison her, only by way of new kinds of rules, new kinds of “do’s” and “don’ts”. She tries to discern what aspects of her rule-resentment that have to do with her projecting her former experience from Christian contexts, and what aspects that might be grounded in ‘actual phenomena out there’: is there a pointed finger, or not?

### **8.2.10 Relevance and change**

Marit elaborates on why she finds Buddhism interesting:

*“Meditation is a concrete thing. But I also think that, like the concept of suffering, what is suffering? One can dig oneself deep down having knowledge about it, but one can also ask, is there a way that I can change the way I relate to difficulties? Is there a way I can change the way I think, so that I don’t get stuck in the same hang-ups like before?” That is when things get exciting. That is when something happens in your everyday life, and I notice that it has for me. Things are difficult no matter what. But I manage to distance myself a bit more than before. I*

*think it is very important with love and compassion. How to see other people in a different manner, you see a stranger on the street, and you are a bit more observant of the fact that you are part of the same world. I used to think that all the people were too much for me; it was too much to relate to. I tried to have as little as possible to do with people that were not relevant to my life, sort of. But I have a more open attitude now, because all people are relevant to me, because we are all people. I believe that I am more present when meeting people. And if I am (I may be wrong), then the knowledge I have acquired has done something good in life. It has had a consequence. And that is what I am after.”*

Marit talks about a development in which *other people* have become *more relevant* to her. She says that this perception of relevance is a result of cultivating understandings of everybody as part of the same world, and that it has made it easier for her to relate to others. Yet again, her story demonstrates how she is extracting an element from Buddhist philosophy to address an issue she is struggling with in general: the challenge of relating to others.

Marit has also engaged in other activities and practices to handle the challenges of daily life:

*”I have, among other things, gone to Osho Devananda. I have gone to a few courses there. It is a bit more extreme. I don’t know whether you have heard about them?”*

Indeed, I had. I had, at the time when I first went to KTL, found information on Osho Devananda, as they advertised meditation on the Yellow pages. I had called them and asked for information, and they sent me brochures. I was struck by what I found to be high prices, and by the fact that you had to have an HIV-test to attend some of their courses. I never went to any of their courses, as I found what I was looking for at KTL. But I had wondered ever since what was going on there. I asked Marit. She tells me that she knew that there were courses where sexuality was an important part, and that in India you needed an HIV-test even if you only wanted to take a look at the area, she says. But she had not thought it was like that in Norway. *“Well, if there is any group-sex going on, it sounds exciting, maybe I should join a course!”* she exclaims with a big smile. So what were the activities you did engage in there about? I ask.

*“There are role plays, for instance. You address situations from the life you have lived; you pick out roles to play, dad, mom, siblings – whatever. Then you have a kind of dialogue. They have these extreme modes of meditation, where you act out, you yell and jump and scream and dance, it is very active. It is a bit on the edge of what I can accept, but I do believe that some times one might need that kind of strong*

*methods if you are very imbalanced. A person with a lot of aggression might need to get rid of that aggression, before being able to sit down and meditate quietly. One might need to yell and scream and act out within safe boundaries. I myself do not feel that aggression has been my problem, but I do feel that I have been so much out of it that I have needed strong methods to... at least if I wanted to move on fast, I need a lot of, and very strong, methods to get right on track again. I feel that I am on track now, so I don't feel the need for that now."*

Marit says that the activities that Osho Devananda offers are of value, but that right now she feels she is "on track", so she does not "feel the need for that now". She did attend courses there, and found it useful. But as the challenges she faced in her life changed, she needed other tools to address the new situations arising. In later interviews Marit returns to the emphasis on being open towards anything that "feels right, that makes me a more harmonic person". Marit's quest is one towards a happier life. Anything can be a means to that end:

*"If it feels right, I join it. It does not only have to be Buddhism. But it is a question of priorities; one does not have time for everything. I feel that having fun in itself is also important. Dancing, for instance. I dance quite a bit. I feel this is self-development, too. Anything that may make life more colorful is good. But I feel that Buddhist philosophy in a very short time has given me so much, there is a lot here. I have a firm belief that it will be my companion for a long time."*

Marit expresses an emphasis on *whatever works* as what is important, not *ultimate truth*. Beliefs are valued according to their potentials of making change possible, of making a difference that makes a difference to the way she experiences and approaches life, she tells me.

*"If your thoughts have good implications for your life, well, then what you are thinking must be good. Let's say there is a God and Heaven and Hell and stuff, well, I care more about what is here and now. The most important thing is how I handle my life now, what kind of expression it gets in my life. If what I think makes me able to handle things better, well, then that is good enough reason for me to engage in that way of thinking."*

### **8.2.11 Moving on, belonging and claiming life**

When asking Brook about Karma, she tells me that she does not think in terms of Karma at all. But the idea of not being able to do anything about pain, or not having any control of your

life, is difficult, she says. Because of that, the potentials of bringing about change in your life, central to her understanding of Karma, is something she would like to embrace, she says. However:

*“How things are, I don’t know. I feel there is a lot of stuff that I just have to leave be, I cannot get the answers. Beginning and end, time and space, ideas like there is always a consequence, that there is nothing that is not a consequence of something else. You could see it that way; that everything is interconnected, that we are all part of the same, that it makes no difference who suffers, that if I do something towards another, I do it towards myself. “What is important is the idea that everybody has potentials. That what you do can bear fruit, somehow. That things are not impossible to change, that it is not that difficult to move on.”*

What matters to Marit is the basic idea about everybody having potentials that can be realized, that people can “bear fruit”, she says. She may not use the concept of Karma, but the dynamics she understands the concept to entail, are very compatible with her emphasis on “moving on”.

In a later interview, Marit returns to the issue of rules. She has now tried out more of the Buddhist groups, and attended retreats abroad as well. She states that she will always react towards something, and she understands the solution to be one of picking and choosing whatever can be useful to her life, not throwing the baby out with the bathwater:

*“There will always be things that I react against, so I guess I just have to choose what is most rewarding to me. What is important is my development, to become as free as possible.*

Development and freedom are still recurring themes in her story. Marit has started going to the Western Buddhist order now, and she has visited their centers in Great Britain, and she goes regularly to their meetings in Oslo:

*“I see in these people that something has happened, they are different: they have warmth and awareness. They have progressed much further than I have, and that makes me want to go in that direction”*

Marit concludes that whatever it is that these people do, it must be working. As her aim is to bring about change, this observation motivates her to keep attending meditations and courses at the Western Buddhist Order.

*“I am hoping to find, even though I am very fluctuating, and even though I have been in so many different environments, I hope to find a place that I can actually stand being in, without too much prejudice. I am hoping that this may be a place*



*where I can concentrate, where I can settle down in a specific environment. I am planning to go to retreats this summer, and find out some more about it then.”*

Marit pauses for a moment, her eyes are no longer looking at me, or anywhere else in the room, it seems like they are turned towards some inner scenario:

*”When talking to you now, I realize how much I have actually lost, even though I would have had to choose as I did, anyway, I cannot pretend I am a Christian to avoid the loss. But looking back, I realize that I have lost a lot. No wonder I am touchy when it comes to these subjects”.*

For a moment I am tempted to follow up this issue, by making her elaborate upon what these losses entail. But the very next moment I stop myself. Not that I think it would have mattered that much, but who knows? I certainly don't want to make my informants sad by digging in their experience of loss or sad events. I follow up the issue, but I do so by saying: but you have gained something instead?

*“Yes, certainly! Things could not have been any other way! Now I meet people that really give me food for thought. I am actually dating a guy from one of the new groups I am visiting now. I want to experience different alternatives and different kinds of people, if it is rewarding for me, and makes me understand more about life, what is important to me. There will always be something for me to explore. But, I also wish to find something steady. Something that is not just for exploration. Something that is, “this is a place I want to live the rest of my life”, sort of. A place where I can develop. That is what I wish, I think. I hope I can sniff a bit around, but that I can have some kind of base. I have been sniffing for a long time now. But now I begin to get more of a base. In Buddhism. I have also attended different courses here and there, announced in Alternativt Nettverk.”*

In this last quote a new element appears in Marit's story. In our last conversation she merely elaborated on the need of moving on, now she talks about a need to belong. It is this element of belonging she reports missing from her time as a Christian. However, when talking about her present need of belonging, she does not introduce it as opposed to “sniffing around”. “Belonging” is not presented as settling down or as representing stagnation, it is conceptualized as finding “a place where I can develop”.

The issue of belonging is something Marit presents as quite a challenge:

*“In general, I don’t want to be fettered. To say that “I am only this”, and not being able to use other sources as inspiration, that would be hard for me. I see that could be a problem in the group in which I practice now, that one is not supposed to “go fishing” too many other places, but be satisfied with what is there. And I have never been satisfied with what you get where you are. I have never been satisfied trying not to see what other things there are. I will always have an open mind, and a certain direction. I could not stand being totally stopped from doing so, that I cannot seek and take inspiration from other places, maybe read other types of literature. I encounter that attitude again, and it irritates me. I encounter it, through expectations that you should be like this and that, you should not drink, you should not do this and that. To fit in, to go this path. Maybe there is a path that I think is great, there is a lot of good stuff, and I want to be part of the people seeking along that path. And yet, I am supposed to get such whippings, that is how I experience it, that it is not good enough, “if you are supposed to go this path, you ought to shape up”-type of attitude... And it is easy for me to stop drinking alcohol, for instance. Becoming a total vegetarian, for instance. It could be the easiest way out, to avoid the turbulence. But then I feel irritated, why does it have to be that way, it is cowardly. It is black and white thinking. It is easiest for me to avoid resistance and struggle. But I become childish again, maybe I do something to demonstrate that I, that I do not do just anything to fit in. I make trouble for myself.”*

The element of “*pointed fingers*”, another one of Marit’s recurring themes, reaches its peak in our last conversation, as shown in this last paragraph. At this point Marit has had substantially more experience with different Buddhist groups than she had the first time we spoke. In general, Marit engages more in reflection than portrayal of events. Now, however, after pausing briefly, Marit continues in a way that is unusual to our conversations; she actually describes a specific situation:

*“Something happened at a Buddhist gathering I attended; someone came who had not been there a lot before. And he brought a bag of shrimp. Everybody was bringing something. And oh boy, was there a reaction! And then I think, what was most important? The shrimp? Or how that man felt taken care of when he came? If I had come there with a bag of shrimp, oh, I would have felt so stupid, and maybe I had not dared come back ever. So I thought, one can feel sorry for the shrimp, but one should feel even more sorry for the man who brought them. I get a little skeptical that what can be measured is given most importance, compared to what cannot be measured. It creates problems for me.”*

At the time Marit says this, two years have passed since our first conversation in the context of this project. In spite of new events, the major themes that Marit elaborates remain the same. And they have been present through all our conversations. She struggles with the challenges of relating to other people: achieving a balance between expectations from others and what she feels is right, and at the same time making sure she does not become “*extreme*”. She is terrified of “*pointed fingers*”. The importance of development constitutes a scarlet thread in all our conversations, and when pondering the possibility of, and desire for “*belonging*” to a certain place, she does that in terms of development, too. Her stories conjure up a tactile reality, one where she senses powers inside herself, as well as pressure from others, fields of tension she must navigate. Marit tells me she wants a happier life. She reports trying to bring about change by slowly reworking her patterns of thinking and behaving. From her stories I discern a governing idea: the centrality of claiming her life as her own.

### 8.3 Martin

*“To me the essential thing is that you cannot change yourself; that is the point. But you open up, and then a process grabs you and changes you.”*

I met Martin at the Dharma group, where he visited for a period of time. Martin is a man eight years my junior. The first conversations presented here took place in his studio in the center of Oslo. The last took place in his apartment, a place he acquired about a year after our first. We had a total of four narrative conversations over a period of two years. When we started having our conversations, Martin had just gotten back from the USA where he had lived for eight years, and he had just finished his studies in psychology. Martin used to go to a Zen center in the States, and coming back to Norway he was on the lookout for a Buddhist group where he could practice. He looked up the groups in Oslo on the internet, and at the time I first talked to him, he had already visited a few of them. He told me that things are very much unsettled in his life at this point, having just returned from another country, and having just finished his studies. The studio he was renting at this time was a temporary one, and he reported being very much in a transitional phase when I first met him:

*“The only stable thing in my life is my e-mail address...”*

When Martin and I had our last conversation, he had settled in more ways than one. Now he has a job. Now he has an apartment. Now he has found a spiritual environment in which he

has a sense of belonging, he tells me. When Martin and I started having our conversations he was in the process of exploring different Buddhist groups. When we have our last conversation, he has ended up defining himself a Christian, but he is still very much “*friends with Zen*” he says.

### **8.3.1 Demolition and rebuilding**

Martin begins our first conversation by telling me that he has just returned from the USA, where he has lived for eight years, and finished his degree in psychology. When coming home from the USA a difficult time began: His “*welcome home*” consisted in being drafted by the military, and the whole encounter had been a rather unpleasant one.

*“I came back this summer. And then I had to go into the military. So it has been a bit of a life crisis now, you could say that!”*

Martin tells about the frustration he felt regarding the communication, or rather lack of such, with the military:

*“I made the mistake that I related to them [the military] as reasonable people. But I soon understood that it was a mistake. So there I was, without a home, without a job, without a car, nothing. And I thought, now what? I was sitting at my parent’s house for a couple of month, and it became unbearable. And the military did not answer. They just ignored me. And then I rented this place. Luckily, I got a job. And half a year later the military yielded. So they let me go. They let me go.”*

Martin also had to struggle to get his authorization as a psychologist “*in the middle of all this*”, as he puts it. It took months. He tells me about how nobody knew who was responsible or who he should talk to in order to get things done, and people he needed to talk to in the bureaucracy were never there when he tried to call them. But finally he got it fixed, he tells me.

His concrete struggles with the Weberian “iron-cage” of bureaucracy (2000), is something he introduces as part of the context in which his spiritual crisis, as he calls it, takes place:

*“I have some kind of spiritual crisis, too. Psychology is atheistic. And I am not. So that is a project all by itself. The aim of psychology is to make people have as much control of their lives as possible. And analyze their problems and where they themselves come from, and become as conscious as possible. It is especially the religions of the East that I am interested in. And there you find the opposite; the goal is letting go, totally. Instead of driving the car, go get into the back seat. You kind of*

*trust that there are powers greater than you, and that there is so much we can never know anyway. And if we relate to the little we do know, the answers are incomplete anyway, so what's the point. That's the thing. And when you think about it, you see that it is true. It is absurd how little we know about what's out there. The Earth is just a tiny speck of dust in the universe, and I am an even smaller speck of dust on Earth, and then I am supposed to think that I can get any overview... Finding meaning, finding truth. When so much is about our parents, our growing up, our culture, and then you are supposed to find some kind of truth in the midst of all this. It is pretty absurd... The truth for me is that I am a white male, grown up in Bærum and I had this mother and that father. So it crashes for me with psychology, I have to find another path, but I don't know where to go."*

Martin is looking for a path. Just like Marit, he is very reflective and analytical, and shows true engagement when talking. I get an immediate sense of urgency, and the word "struggle" is repeatedly used by Martin:

*"My life has been a struggle for more knowledge. Here I am, a human being, and my life, what do I do about it? I tried to use my head to find solutions. I took my PhD, and I still have the same problems... Nothing has improved... That's when I stumbled upon Zen, and there are monks there who look like they have understood a lot, and then you ask questions, and they say "don't ask, just sit down and meditate..." Crazy! Like, meditate! And that is the basic thing about Zen. Actually, it is a bit strange that it is called Buddhism, because it does not have dogmas or theology and stuff. Practice is the important thing. Just being present. But Tibetan Buddhism is the most intellectual of the Buddhist directions; they just love sitting there engaging in philosophical talk... I find that very tiresome. So that's why I found a Zen group instead. I guess I have not quite found my home in Oslo, but it is Zen Buddhism that I trust. If I wanted to continue reading thick books and philosophize, I could just continue with psychology."*

Martin has had enough of philosophizing, and that's why he is attracted to Zen, with its emphasis on sitting, he tells me. Just like my other informants, his story tells me that his choices are not random, but very much grounded in specific concerns they face, in their individual lives. Martin tells me that nothing had improved by "using his head". So he

turned elsewhere, to Zen, as he saw Zen as presenting a real alternative, holding the promise of much needed change:

*"I have tried the intellectual way. You get so many intellectual concepts that don't permeate your life. You can talk about something in a smart way, and then you go and do the opposite. You don't get the upper hand of the demons, the powers inside yourself."*

Concepts in themselves are talked about as something not having the potential of "*permeating your life*". Concepts are talked about as something merely scratching the surface of things: The "*demons*", the "*powers inside yourself*", are located elsewhere, and must be accessed through other means. Meditation is pointed out as one such possible means:

*"Meditation cuts down to the bone,"*

And he continues:

*"Whereas New Age is the opposite, it is often theoretical constructions and dogmas, actually. But you don't recognize it as dogmas that easily, because you think about dogmas as having more to do with Christianity and Jesus and the Holy Trinity. It is being served in a different package, and you don't recognize it, that it is actually just the same. It has a new wrapping, you don't recognize it, while it is very much theoretical stuff, things you are supposed to accept: beliefs and ideas. Whereas in Zen you cut down to the bone, the experience of merely sitting there. Down to the bone."*

Martin tells me that he resents theoretical constructions and dogma, and he is on guard when it comes to "*same shit, new wrapping*". A similar wariness could be found in Marit's stories, with her fear of repeating what she conceives of as her former mistakes regarding Christianity.

Martin is tired of words, he tells me, and he does not believe that truth resides in words themselves. He is looking for something beyond words, beyond what his academic education can provide. Even though his academic discipline is psychology, he tells me that the analytical perspective is not enough when facing the challenges he experiences in real life:

*"According to religion, one is supposed to go through these things. Things that in psychology are being treated like problems and disease. But the religious, it is something you have to go through; it provides a totally different perspective. It is a classic, that when life falls apart one starts seeking God. God and psychologists. [ ] Which does not make seeking less genuine; it is merely what triggers it. If I had had a normal family, I might not have started seeking God. Part of it is seeking away from things on this earth, but it does not end there!"*

Martin tells me about an experience of being broken down as the basis for his reflections. As is the case with Marit: there is much at stake. As is the case with Marit: he does not stop by pointing out difficulties. He elaborates on how difficulties can be understood as opportunities to bringing about a change for the better:

*“There is something about the pressure and confusion that drives us forward. I believe that is part of the point. The point is to create a pressure from behind as well as towards us. Because the moment you get comfortable, you just sit there. It’s the same way in therapy. Without anxiety and depression you don’t go to therapy. You have to experience discomfort in a situation. It does not help that you are a narcissist and everybody finds you unbearable, as long as you are feeling fine!”*

He elaborates on his experience of falling apart. The tools that psychology had given him do not suffice. He resents the reductionist perspective of psychology, interpreting an existential crisis as merely problems or a disease. What Martin says here reminds me of my own experience: how the events I went through acquired a radically different quality when seen as blessings. The blessings came in disguise, and unwrapping the blessings was a veritable chore... But the idea of grief as blessing had some hope attached to it, as the very misery could be seen as a tool helping me to gain insight. Martin maintains that anxiety and depression are forces that *“drive us forward”*. As is the case with Marit, Martin emphasizes development and movement as important.

Seeking, moving on, is in the stories of both Marit and Martin intimately linked with the experience of something important being at stake in their lives. Martin reflects:

*“I look back on my life, and reflect on it. I have been through so many crises. I believe that has made things so much more powerful for me. It is scary that you have to go through a horrible period where you feel torn apart. That things have to be torn down for you to be rebuilt as a new person. It seems like you have to be torn apart before you let go, give yourself up and become a new person. Life can be an even stream of problems and difficulties, but it is not enough for you to take radical action. You don’t, until you are forced to. The last choice you have, sort of.”*

Martin talks about processes that he has been thrown into, he talks about being forced. He tells me that he would not have been engaging in *“rebuilding”* himself, unless he had actually found himself torn apart to begin with. Martin tells me about an experience of a something that he has to relate to, whether he wants to or not.

### 8.3.2 Manifestations and transformation

I asked Martin how he first encountered Buddhism. He tells me that it happened in the USA. A professor in his psychology class was into Eastern religion, and suggested that meditation was a useful tool, he says, and inspired by this professor he tried it out.

*“Then something happened, just some kind of experience. It felt like I had been in touch with something, sort of. [ ] One can have a glimpse of what it is to be enlightened. And when you have felt that, it is not possible to ever forget. I don’t know, it is some kind of depth, right, it is such light that you never forget, it is some kind of opening, sort of, it is overwhelming, it never goes away again. And when you have seen that, it never settles down again, you sort of have no choice, you have to continue. It is that old cliché, that if you can put words on it, it is not enlightenment! It is everything you can dream of, and more. You can use any possible adjective. It is confidence, trust, happiness, energy, silence – your mind just becomes quiet. You are just present, and everything is present, sort of. You just observe, you are not afraid of anything, and everything is just perfect. There is an enormous feeling of safety and a presence, that you are part of something, that you are invulnerable. The greatest gift Zen gives is to get rid of fear.*

*I am often afraid of a lot of strange stuff, but at those moments in meditation I experience a total lack of fear. It is a tremendous experience. The words detachment, and presence, and maybe absence at the same time. It is being in the world, but not of the world, sort of. It is also an enormous feeling to stand a place and feel that you really hear and see everything that goes on around you without interpreting it, but just being there. It is just a crazy feeling. All fear and all problems disappear. An enormous presence. Cars, houses, they do not exist. They simply do not matter. When you have found that depth, that source, everything else just falls apart. It does not matter.*

*It is difficult to talk about it in everyday life, because people don’t understand it. People misunderstand, and think that I am talking about a stunted emotional life. Just a man who goes into the garage and.... Just withdraws from the world, and is emotionally unavailable. And I am not. But people think that it is kind of an illness. But unless you have felt it, you don’t know what detachment is. When it comes to talking about not letting things get to you, then people think that, OK, he is supposed to be so cool and hard, sort of. That Zen is some kind of island inside you where you can go, and nobody can reach you, sort of. Becoming stunted in your emotional life*



*and withdrawing to your garage or whatever, that is sort of, that is just a mechanism of defense. That is lack of openness, whereas detachment is openness. A lot of people have trouble grasping this. So I don't usually talk about it. You cannot understand unless you have experienced it yourself. It makes dialogue about it meaningless. I can hint a bit to my friends about it, but it is difficult, because suddenly you are in the middle of an intellectual discussion. Actually, it is not a discussion; they want to convince me that I have just taken refuge in a stunted emotional life, some kind of shield that I have built, sort of. Whereas I see it the other way around."*

Martin talks about different ways of perceiving reality, dealing with fear, and the challenge of communicating his experience to others. A recurring theme in Martin's stories is *transcendence*, and the sense of a *presence*. He talks about "*being in touch with something*", "*glimpses of enlightenment*", "*an encounter with something that cannot be put into words*". He keeps returning to experiences he describes as overwhelming, and as being of religious significance. Martin talks about opening up, he talks about something entering you. But he emphasizes that he is not on any quest for mystique. The experiences he reports are not something he has sought out, he says that it is not like he has "*danced for hours*" to achieve any specific state of mind. It is rather as if moments of religiously significant experience come to him. They are portrayed as *manifestations*, something he has to relate to, just like he has to relate to any other kind of experience in his life. Martin is rather attracted to the "*simplicity*" of Zen, with its emphasis on just sitting. Sitting and breathing.

Another basic, and related, theme is *non-control*. The world Martin conjures up, is one in which you are merely partly in control, if at all. He says that you can open up, but what happen afterwards are processes that take place without your interference:

*"The idea is letting go. I would say that is the basic thought in the East. Like I said, instead of driving the car, you get into the back seat, sort of. That you sit there means that you have surrendered to someone who is much better at driving than you are yourself, sort of. There is so much that happens that we cannot control, anyway. One can try frantically, but one cannot do it. Might as well take a couple of days and live without trying to control things, and just see what happens. Things go just as well if you don't try to control them."*

Martin returns to the issue of control and letting go through every conversation we have:

*"There is an emphasis in society on having control. They say, yes, but you have control over your own life, take control! It is just amazing. It is such a total*

*illusion. You may get robbed, you may get cancer, you may be hit by a car or your customers may decide to go to someone else. It is living in a total illusion. They think they have control... “Not to mention, if one believes one has total control over everything, what does it mean then, that someone loves you? That it was me who created something? That I made you love me? That is a terrible thought!”*

In one of our later conversations, he returns to the issue of non-control when telling me about experiences he had in a place in France called Taizé. He tells me that Taizé was established in 1940 by a monk who went there to help refugees from the Second World War, and that now it is an ecumenical gathering place. More and more have started going on pilgrimage there, Martin tells me: At most they have about 7000 people there every week. He heard of this place from the professor in the USA, who had suggested both Plum Village and Taizé to him,

*“thinking those places would suit me best, religiously. That turned out to be true. So I am there for a week, eat, sleep, go to a short sermon thrice a day, meet people from all over the world. When you get home, you have sort of got a new start – before you forget everything, sort of... (laughs) Taizé has a lot in common with Zen Buddhism, it is a place free from dogmas and theology. Zen is where Buddhism and Christianity meet. The thought of opening up for God. Being aware, present, silent, being open. Then you go through a process that you don’t totally control. You open up for something that enters you.”*

In Taizé he had a very special experience. Martin tells me that

*“I have found an opening, spiritually, the way I see it. Through Christ.*

*I did not know this brother Roger, but there were thousands of people in the auditorium. At the end of the week he just came out into the auditorium, sat down, and people came to be blessed. To tell it quickly: their liturgy consists of very short prayers, a couple of sentences, that they chant over and over again, and it goes deeper and deeper inside of you, it does. When I have been sitting there for a while, and am about to leave, I saw that there were not that many people around me anymore. Most of them had left. So I sat down, and then he turned and looked at me – and it was just.... It was probably the most intense thing I have ever experienced. It cannot be described. It was like looking into Heaven. It was so strange, just his face and eyes just shone, his head just shone. I became speechless, I was in emotional turmoil, I almost did not feel well. And there was no doubt that there was something powerful. I sort of subscribe to the view that one doesn’t try to describe it, because God, or whatever it is, is so powerful you cannot understand it anyhow.”*

Martin experiences something powerful that emanates towards him. He senses something powerful manifesting itself *that is not Martin himself*. Martin finds “*an opening through Christ*”, because he experiences “*a power*”, as he puts it.

Later on in our conversation, Martin returns to this episode:

*”When I met him, it was a very special experience. It was almost too much for me. The first time he looked at me, I don’t know how to describe it. It was totally... I don’t know... the best thing I can say is that it was.... I feel like saying... it was like seeing God. A very special face and eyes that just shone from goodness and love and I love you – just totally like that. I was just totally.. He talks about this darkness inside us, whatever it may be, self-hatred, aggression, fear and anxiety. He talks about God being the light inside us. Even though he is a weak flame, he lights up all those dark corners. A light that is deeper than all the rest. A lot of prayers are about that, the weakness of man, the darkness of man. There are these short songs that say that “Jesus, you shine inside me”. Neither darkness nor doubt, but we open up for your love. You sing this with those melodies, over and over again. It penetrates you deeper and deeper. I would not call it trance, not at all. It is not a trance. But you sense that something very good is penetrating your heart, which gives you peace. It is not about visions and dancing around. Not at all. On the contrary, you have a strong feeling of peace. Of being present.”*

These are moments Martin describes as being beyond language. Seemingly a contradiction, as words and reflections pile up when Martin addresses these issues. But the words may also be understood as piling up, as if trying to break through a door that just won’t open. The fact that he pauses and stutters more when addressing these issues indicates that he is having difficulties finding words.

Martin shows me an icon he has.

*“It is orthodox, originally from Eastern Europe. The icons are supposed to be a window to God. This is the Holy Trinity, or three angels sitting at a table. But the table has four sides, and the idea is that when you sit in front meditating, you are invited inside. So then you sit there at the fourth side surrounded by God. You are totally silent in front of God, and let him fill you up. Being present, being quiet, being open. Going through a process that changes.”*

The God that Martin talks about, reminds me of the God that Marit relates to, something to be found through “*inner experience*”, that can be found in nature, or understood as “*filling you*

up". In Martin's narratives there seems to be an intense experience of a power that not only "is nature", as Marit put it, but that has the power to take action in itself. To Martin, the very point is that "you cannot change yourself", but that you can open up for this power that can transform you:

*"You open up for a power that changes your life. We talked about the icons. That you meditate on the word, that it moves into you, form part of you, you don't think about it to figure it out, but it has formed part of you, it penetrates you. It is a window to God that you open; the word is the same whether icon or picture. You sit by it and meditate, I can visualize how I am sitting at the fourth side, and I just let that be an experience in itself. You are open towards God, and it becomes a living process inside you."*

Martin talks about "a living process inside you", as opposed to dead dogmas. He talks about God as being beyond words, much like Marit talks about the God she relates to now. It is as if Marit not only takes back her own life, but she also 'takes back God', by making God part of herself. This can also seem to be the case with Martin. It is as if God becomes real, and *his*, through his own experience of the transcendent. He does not just tell me about being in touch with God, he describes the process as becoming one with God, something living and unfolding inside of you, bringing about a transformation.

### **8.3.3 Living processes and non-control**

Martin elaborates on how opening up for processes of transformation can be done in different ways:

*"At Taizé they use one or two sentences that you repeat, over and over again. What happens is that these sentences sing themselves into you. They do. As time passes, they stick inside you. You walk around with this inside you. You get the experience of a power that moves inside you. You do, in your head, sort of. It is very much in contrast to especially the Catholic Church where there is very little focus upon the Holy Spirit and the power that moves. I am almost tempted to say, quite the contrary. You are not supposed to think about those things yourself; that is up to the priest. You are supposed to do what the priest tells you. But this is a power that moves inside every individual human being. That's the way it is. You sing all these songs that gradually move inside you. And then we read a few verses from the Bible. And a prayer. In different languages. English, Latin, Swedish, Eastern European languages that I don't recognize. That is how the days pass. And then you are*

*divided into different assignment groups, you sort of work and do something useful. You are given chores that are being changed every week. The dishes; one person takes the cup, another washes it, a third dries it. You are jointly responsible.”*

Martin is consistent; the songs “*sing themselves into you*”. You are the one singing the songs, but by doing so, processes beyond your control are triggered. The songs “*move inside you*”, as Martin puts it. This movement of something inside of you is contrasted to mere intellectual understandings that he portrays as dead, as having no potential for accomplishing transformation. Your whole being has to be involved, and you have to be open, so that something becomes part of you, that is the way Martin talks. It becomes a “*living process*”, as he puts it. Being “*open*” is an element I also recognize from Marit’s narratives, as well as the necessity of being involved with your whole being. Martin talks about the Catholic Church, and expresses a critical attitude towards the idea that another human being, the priest, should be the ultimate authority on truth: “*There is a power that moves inside every individual human being*”. The ultimate authority is understood as not to be found in scriptures or through other human beings, it resides “*inside you*”.

In our first conversation Martin talks about God, “*or whatever it is*”. He uses the metaphor of sitting in the back seat instead of driving the car. The first time he uses the metaphor his explanation is that “*you kind of trust that there are powers greater than you*”. The next time he becomes more specific: “*Sitting there means that you have surrendered to someone who is much better at driving than you are yourself*”. From “*powers greater than you*” he is now talking about a “*someone*”. As these different ways of putting it occur in the same conversation, it seems to suggest that Martin is describing different aspects of the same phenomenon. I ask: do you believe in some kind of God?

*“I do. It may be because I am not very enlightened, but, I don’t understand the part of Buddhism that talks about rules, but no God, sort of. The way I see it there is a power. They believe in laws that run the universe. Detachment. Presence. Breathing, right. You find a place in yourself, some kind of Buddha nature. Isn’t that God? “No, it is not God...” Hey OK.... To me, that is God. I believe in God very much. I don’t see the difference. If you call it Karma or God or Buddha-nature, it is some kind of power. God does not have to be like a human being. There is a power.”*

Martin experiences a power, and says it can be understood as many things; God, Karma and Buddha-nature.

*“The godless religion is very alien to me. I cannot picture being without God, sort of. To me that is too alien. To me it is absurd that there is no God. Where do all*

*these powers come from? They believe in Karma and rebirth, but not God. I never quite got that. I understand that I probably don't have the necessary frames of reference, their point may be fully valid, but I don't get it. Who runs it? It is like, a car without a driver, sort of."*

Martin's way of telling is very captivating, and I find myself swept into the scenarios that he conjures up. The powers of God, the living process inside you, it lingers with me long after I have left his apartment, as if I have had a taste of a religious experience myself, as if the conversation has triggered processes in me as well.

Captivating and convincing, Martin is very explicit – just like Marit, and many other informants with them – on the issue of relativism. Relativism in the sense that 'what is right for me is not necessarily right for you'. In this sense they both fall into a much larger pattern. But they elaborate on the issue of relativism in different ways. Martin says:

*"During the sermons in Taizé, you sit down in front of God, precisely as you are. You sit there as who you are. But you has to find out what is right for yourself, whatever works for you. It is about being conscious. It is the eternal question about what is right for you... You have to find your own path. I know a couple of people, Catholics, who are incredibly spiritual and deep, and they have clearly contact with God, a deep contact with God. It is obvious that these are people who get in touch with God that way, and it is important to find one's own path. I have met Christians who have clearly encountered something, so I believe that different stuff works for different people, but for me, Zen works well. My experience is that I have the frameworks that suit me, and within them I have freedom to find what I need to find. Without them I don't think I would have been able to find it, but more frameworks would not have worked either. I don't think I would define myself as a "Zen-dist", because I believe that Zen is one of many paths, sort of. To me it is a path that works very well. I would never claim that "this is The Way", because I believe there are a lot of other good things, too. I believe that different things work for different people, because it is clear that there are people who gain a lot from Christianity that I have not been able to find there. It touches something in them that doesn't touch me, sort of.*

*That different things work for different people is one of the reasons why I like Zen more and more. Because you can say this, whereas Christians get total anxiety for death if you say it. It is," no, no, Jesus has said that if you don't believe in him,*

*you end up in Hell! Very few Christians are open for the thought that there are other paths. It says in the Bible, that "I am the way, the truth and the life", right, but if you are an atheist, you end up in Hell. Zen is a lot more open. I am convinced that different religions work for different people. Zen touched me a lot. It is built on paradoxes; the idea is that our intellect does not suffice. We cannot see the truth. [ ]. I like Zen because it is free from dogmas. The more I am being preached to, the more bits and pieces there are that I don't agree with, and it does not suit me. Zen is about inner experience, not a lot of dogmas. It is this idea about the circles of thought that just go around and around but never reach any goal, and 80% of them are just repetitions, and even if you think and think you never arrive at any goal. The answer is to get beyond yourself, to get to those problems."*

Martin's emphasis is on "inner experience". When reflecting upon Buddhism contra Christianity, Martin compares and elaborates on different elements according to their potential for incorporating his experience of the power that he calls God, in a way that makes sense to him.

*"What I like about Zen Buddhism, is that it tries to get to the religion before religion. Where everything just... penetrates down to a truth so open and wide. In a way I find it strange to call Zen Buddhism, because Buddhism has so many thoughts and dogmas and rules. To me it is an inner experience. Of the spiritual. Of God. Or whatever you are supposed to call it."*

In our first conversations, the simultaneous interest in Buddhism and Christianity does not seem to represent any major conflict to Martin. On the contrary, it seems like the application of different approaches rather adds to his ability to get at different aspects of his experience, to grasp what is already part of his experience, and simultaneously - through interpretation, change of perspectives and ways of relating – transform and create new experience. He can approach transcendence in a multitude of ways. He can understand it as Buddha-nature or as being created in God's image, and he can seek it out through meditation as well as prayer or chanting.

However, he does end up choosing Christianity. Along the way Martin finds that there are differences that make a difference to him; which eventually makes him choose. Even though he points out that Buddha-nature, Karma and God may be different names for some of the same phenomena, he does not see the concepts that Christianity and Buddhism introduce as

fully interchangeable. He elaborates on what he perceives as differences. Among other things, Martin points out the following as an important distinction to him:

*"The difference is that Zen Buddhism says you save yourself by hard work. It is Jewish, kind of, work very hard to save yourself. Christianity says you cannot do that. All you can do is to surrender to God, just as you are. You will never be perfect."*

What Martin concludes here, is a striking contrast to numerous other informants. In general, my informants tended to point out the very same observation as part of their explanation of why they chose Buddhism. Martin, however, makes the same observation, but sees it as an argument in favor of choosing Christianity. Later on Martin returns to the subject of difference, and elaborates upon what it means to surrender to God:

*"There is a basic difference between Buddhism and Christianity. There is no God in Buddhism, nobody can forgive you. If someone hurts you, it may be because you owe something from an earlier life. Christianity is the other way around. But it has become very twisted. Christianity says that you are not perfect, and then they have gotten hung up on that, saying that "I am a terrible and sinful and horrible human being". But the point is, you are not perfect, but you become perfect by uniting with God, and he accepts you as you are. God has created man in his image. That has to mean some kind of Buddha nature; otherwise it does not make sense".*

What many of my other informants have pointed out as an element they find difficult to digest within Christianity, is what they experience as an emphasis on human beings as sinful. They much prefer the idea of the basic goodness, the idea that we are already Buddhas, and that the challenge is merely one of realizing this.

Martin too, is against an emphasis on sin. However, he says that this emphasis is a result of twisted interpretation. Martin says that the very point is that you *do* become perfect, by uniting with God. He refers to the Bible, where it says that man is created in God's image, and *"that has to mean some kind of Buddha-nature"*. In embracing Christianity, Martin is also embracing some of the same values that those of my informants who reject Christianity embrace. They have simply understood Christianity in different ways. Yet, there is a difference between Martin and most of my other informants: Martin insists firmly on the impossibility of having control, whereas most of my other informants maintained the opposite. They may not claim that they have control, but most express belief in the possibility of being in control, and present it as something they are working towards.



### 8.3.4 Banging the head

In the beginning of our conversation, Martin shares many general reflections. As our conversation proceeds, these reflections are increasingly presented as grounded in experience. He elaborates on how his struggles began when he was a kid. His religious inclinations can be traced back to his childhood, he says, when I ask him if he has always experienced God.

*“Yes, guess I have always been religious. Then I had this horribly long period, years, where I had the feeling that God disappeared. I did not feel any presence. And it lasted.. actually, not until this year, through this crisis, did it return. But between fifteen and twenty-five I felt no presence. Then it started to seep into my life again. I sensed a presence. I never gave up, I was always looking, but I did not feel any presence. It was this life crisis. I was at the Zen center, I have a very deep feeling of it, nobody understands it when I say, that in the middle of nothing you find everything. People look at me like a... But it is true. In the middle of nothing you find everything.”*

Martin tells me that he was “driven to religion”:

*“My parents claimed to be atheists. A lot of what drove me to religion; I thought it was lack of what I did not have from home. I felt that I did not have any answers to things. And when I looked at their lives, it was nothing that I wanted. So I felt... I guess, I can remember having these thoughts that I felt a little lost. The religious was a bit more compulsively motivated when I was a child. I believe it had to do with everything being very chaotic and painful at home. It was probably a route of escape, but very, very early, from I was a child, there was always some kind of curiosity, and of course, the Norwegian church was available. I became a teenager, and kept seeking, I was a little bit in the charismatic church, but it was a bit too much of a good thing... I did not want that. It was just praying for salvation, sort of. I gave my life to Jesus innumerable times, but painful things kept happening. I never got rid of the pain. Then I went to the university, and it was a period over several years, where I was curious, but I felt I had no contact with anybody named God, in any way, emotionally. So it was sort of non existent. Then last year I started going to that Zen center, and I felt that I got in touch with something.”*

During our last conversation Martin tells me more about his family, but he also points out:

*“Having had that kind of experience does not make seeking less genuine, it is what triggers it. If I had had a normal secure family, I might not have started seeking*

*God. Part of it is seeking away from things on this Earth, but it does not end there! It is about finding truth. To me religion is something very deep and genuine; it is the answer in the last instance. It has been a very long personal path to get there. But the answer is clear. It is rooted deep within me."*

Martin talks about religion as deep and genuine, as something it has been a long and personal path to get at for him. The answers, he says, are "*rooted deep within me*". He talks about being "*in touch with something*". He uses metaphors of depth, length and of being grounded to describe his experience, conjuring up a very tactile reality. Throughout our conversations, Martin returns to the same themes of struggle. Change does not happen easily or overnight. In one of our last conversations, he says that

*"Since I got home from the US, I have been on this deep, painful journey within myself."*

He has been on this journey for quite some time now, and he does not foresee it ending anytime soon, either:

*"It is possible that I have to go even further there. I don't quite know."*

His journey has been "*deep*", and the concept of journey implies movement. He conjures up a multidimensional reality in which he navigates.

He reflects on the fact of experienced difficulties, trying to understand what this is all about:

*"Maybe it is supposed to be that way. It is a religious thought, I don't quite reject the idea that I am being held in limbo, that I am supposed to go through a few things."*

Martin feels he is being held in limbo. He wants to get out, but suggests that he might even have to go further on the deep and painful journey, regardless of his wishes and strategies.

*"I am still in limbo. I hope for answers very much; otherwise I might end up in a monastery in a few months. I know I have said that for a long time... but it is still an alternative. I have to get through it, I have to get the answers, I have to get out of it, sort of. There is no way back anymore, right. I have sort of gone that far into myself and this process, that I have to continue and complete it. So. Now I'll take a week in France, sit down and talk to some of the sensible monks there, and see what they have to say, and then, we'll see. I will get out again, I believe there is something that I am supposed to accomplish. I don't think I will be stuck here in limbo for ever. But you never know..."*

In our next conversation he brings up the subject of being stuck again:

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*"I believe that there are things that I am supposed to do, there is some kind of power that has driven me to where I am today. I would become nuts if I am not going to accomplish anything now, sort of! It is absurd, if I should have gone through this whole process and then get nowhere with it..."*

Martin keeps struggling. Transformation does not seem to be brought about simply by trying out different ways of making sense of experience. Transformation is not just brought about by telling a different story about what happens. In fact, he is trying out different stories, different interpretations of his difficulties, but they don't seem to become part of his reality, in the sense of making any change with regard to how he feels. By listening to Martin as well as Marit over a period of two years, it seems clear to me that just telling a story about things being different is not the same as simultaneously experiencing things are different. As if I did not know from my own attempts at bringing about change.

Martin is expressing a certain degree of desperation; what if he is going through all of this and doesn't get anywhere with it? He refuses to believe that everything is futile, he says, but the fact that he is pointing it out, tells a story about an inner conversation he is having with himself. I am not the one who has expressed any doubts about the outcome of his crisis. He is. And then he is discussing it with himself, with me as a listener. Martin tries desperately to achieve some change, but in spite of his utmost efforts, he perceives he is being stuck. Over a period of two years he is reporting to me that he is still *"banging his head"* against something. He reports encountering some kind of resistance to his efforts for change. Not only does he elaborate on this resistance, but the fact that he is pondering the same issues over and over again over such a long period of time, tells a story in itself, along with the way in which he talks about these issues.

Martin tells me that he does not believe in God, he is experiencing God. These are two different issues, he says:

*"To me it is not a question of believing. God just exists, sort of. There always come up new things that turn everything upside down. That's why I lean towards the mystical tradition, the inner experience. But you also encounter very complex issues there, because your own psychology enters the picture, right? What is God, and what is your own psychology. You need to know yourself, what I believe in, something that goes beyond my own circumstances. You become Christian simply by growing up in Norway. So you need to find some heavy argument outside your circumstances. People usually think about God as fair, and that is how they want to live themselves."*

*And if your parents were strict, you think that God is strict. So you need to find something objective. That is what drew me towards Zen, seeking the root of religion. Even though that is just an ideal.”*

Martin tells me that inner experience is the only thing that can be relied on, in a world of an otherwise fluctuating “truth”. Simultaneously he grapples with issues regarding what constitutes this “inner experience”. Martin is not a psychologist for nothing, and later in our conversation he returns to these issues:

*“So many circumstances will influence your choices. The answer is, I believe, that if you really know yourself, then it becomes your choice anyway. You can take a stand. You can say, ok, I am a Christian, I grew up in Norway, my grandmother was a Christian, and it influenced me. Then you have some kind of free choice. But you never get away from your history. You don’t. I have met a few so called enlightened people. But you can still see how they used to be, they are not a blank sheet! At least not the ones I have met. I am not saying that what they say is worthless, but when they talk, I hear the resonance of things, I can guess matters concerning their childhood and parents, it never disappears. So sorting out religion is not easy. Yeah, I am aware that powers have shaped me, that my mother has had something to do with it, and I don’t believe everything is freedom and stuff...”*

### **8.3.5 Demolition revisited**

Martin and I are sitting in his new apartment; two years have passed since our first conversation. I say to him, a lot has happened since the last time? Martin laughs;

*“Yes, quite a bit...”*

You are, quite literally, in a different place, and maybe otherwise, too? I ask.

*“Physically and spiritually, yes.”*

Could you tell me a bit about that? I ask. What has happened, more specifically? Martin tells me about his new job at a hospital, and he has also started out a private practice.

*“Through the process I went through myself I have – like most people who have gone through tough processes – you get some kind of empathy. I have this feeling that, it is strange, but I have an awareness and tenderness; this is a human being, right, be very careful, I know how I used to feel myself! Now I have more the feeling that life is too short. Right, a feeling that life is a gift. So now I experience that I can help them sort out things a lot more.”*

Martin has not just gotten a nice apartment; he has gotten a job in which he feels he can use his resources. And he tells me that the pool of resources that he draws on is not just his education, it is also his own experience of having gone through a crisis. He tells me that this has taught him a lot, that he has developed a capacity for empathy that he would not have had otherwise.

Martin reports that not only has the crisis provided him with a better ability to understand others in similar situations, but that it has changed him as well:

*“There is so much, you have to be torn apart and patched up again, start all over again. Then you become a different person. You do. The dark night of the soul, when you are robbed of everything, when you get to the root of yourself and are rebuilt, then, you become something else. The point is, that when everything becomes so painful that you have no other choice, then you change. I guess that’s what happened to me, too. I had my PhD and I had tried everything, girlfriends and partying, and I was still hurting. Then I had no choice, I had to go into myself, sort of.”*

The first time I spoke to you, you said that the only stable thing in your life was your e-mail address! I say to him.

*“Yes, that was then...”*

Did that have something to do with your process of seeking? I ask.

*“Well, at that time I was totally demolished...”*

OK... I say. We both laugh, and pause for a moment. Then Martin continues:

*“At that time I had just come home from the USA and gone to the military, and I was totally broken. And that is what the dark night of the soul is like. You are totally broken. And paradoxically, I felt the presence of God stronger then.”*

Are you out of it now? I ask.

*“Yes. Or rather, I am not there yet. But I am in a safe haven. And it is the damndest thing; it is so amazing how a human being is constructed, because the moment you are in a safe haven, you start forgetting what’s important again. It is unbelievable. To have safe ground under your feet, and then you start to think about, sort of... cars and boats and houses... You have to get torn apart to see what is important, and even I who had such a terrible time for such a long time, and yet there is something in you that never learns!”*

Martin laughs.

*“Hell, it’s unbelievable. We are strange creatures. I know it is wasting one’s life, but one gets pulled into it... Strange.”*

At the end of our very first conversation, I had asked Martin where he pictured himself a year from now. Do you, at all...? I had asked. Martin had paused for a moment, contemplating. Then he said:

*“It is a little early... I am wondering. I have tasted Zen, and that makes you a bit uninterested in other stuff. I have considered it a good idea to become attached to a certain center. At the same time there is nothing that I yearn for or force myself into. One can be spiritual and “Zen-dist” and live and be present in a normal life. The idea is that with the right basis we can make everything meaningful, so to speak. No matter whether you are a janitor or a principal or whatever. If you go into it, you can make it meaningful. It has less to do with your job than it has to do with your point of departure. I feel a bit drawn back and fourth. I believe that a generally meaningful life can be acquired that way, being in an ordinary job. At the same time I feel like withdrawing from everything. And I contemplate the possibility of spending some time every year at a Zen center. Maybe some weeks. Here and there. And live that life fully then.”*

When we talk the last time, he reports being in a “safe haven”. He defines himself as a Christian. He tells me that he goes to church every Sunday; he no longer visits any of the Buddhist groups:

*“I have found my home. I am not, it was just totally wrong, that’s how I experienced it [going to the Buddhist groups]. I went to one of the groups a couple of weeks ago, together with a girlfriend who is at the beginning of her seeking. But it was totally wrong. It is nothing for me.”*

I note that Martin talks about his friend as “being at the beginning of her seeking”. So I ask him, does that mean there is an end to seeking, too?

*“I believe you get to a point where things settle down, where you are no longer seeking. You never totally reach your goal, but... One of the prayers of the founder of Taizé, is that we never understand everything, but the presence of Christ is enough to carry us day by day. You always have that presence. That presence. And that’s enough. That’s how I experience it, too. I always carry the dream that everything will fall in its place, but that would make everything so boring, too!”*

Martin laughs. He is not talking about being at the point where he no longer seeks; he is merely expressing a belief in that as a possibility.

*“So there is something about the tension. To be a bit in the darkness, to have the confidence that makes it exciting, alive, that you move forwards. Experience, I dare to move in confidence to God, in spite of my logic, life is exciting and stimulating. And when I don’t, when I cling to the safe things, then it becomes boring. When I dare to have confidence, there is so much I don’t have the answers to. But there is something about confidence. Daring to have confidence. In spite of things. Then it is something inside me that opens up, feelings, or life that is exciting.”*

Martin goes to the American church in Oslo:

*“I don’t know what it is, but I feel that I am in the presence of God when I am there. There is nothing special about the congregation, quite to the contrary! It is very much, it is an international church. And it is very much... people are here a few months or years. At the sermons you notice that the clientele changes. Musically, it is often just terrible!! They play wrong and sing out of tune, there is no logic in me enjoying being there... It is just a feeling. The presence of God, simply. Also, there are a lot of people there. I have the experience of a community. When I go to the Norwegian church I don’t feel that. There is me and a couple of old ladies, sort of.. But there, I don’t know. There is something about it.”*

“When you talk about community, it must somehow be colored by the constant turnover?”

*“Certainly. But there is something I experience, that the key to Christianity is not logic, because there is no logic. The Bible is full of holes, and Jesus says a lot of strange things I will never understand, and never defend. The key to Christianity for me is the experience, that you are part of the same. It is very hard to explain in a way, but it is the feeling that we are family, even though the faces change.”*

So the sense of community is not the same as mingling with the people there? I ask.

*“Yes, it is not that kind of community. I have had enough of that in my life. People can always join in organizational activities or something, but here there is a different kind of community. One of the brothers in Taizé says that Christianity is primarily a religion of presence. The experience of the presence of Christ. There is no logic. To me that is ground-breaking. My whole life I used to believe that I could and should save myself with my brain...”*

I ask Martin, you talked about the field of tension between religion and psychology, how do you handle that now?

*“How I handle that... Hmm... There is no easy answer to that. I think there are two things. I think that one can help. And that goes hand in hand with all religions, at least Christianity; it is a service to do good. Both in the USA and in Norway there are a lot of Christian organizations that do a lot for hospitals and stuff. Kirkens bymisjon, for instance, they have a lot of stations for drug addicts. But they are very anonymous. There is a lot I did not even know about. Bymisjonen is only a service, they do not preach at all. So that is one way I think about practicing psychology. It is doing good. It is also helping people to go on, that is something that in itself will lead them closer to God – and at least make them better people. So now I am at peace with it. A patient with some heavy psychiatric diagnosis is someone I have different aims for than someone who is standing on his own two feet, but going through a life crisis. It is just a question of where you go in to help someone who is stuck. I have enough confidence in God to look at myself, it is an external mix, like one of the brothers in Taizé says; you take 100% responsibility for life, but you give God responsibility, too. So I can just, I can treat what comes to me, and do the best I can with it. And after all, it has to be a bit up to God as well what he wants with this human being afterwards. I see it as my task to help them getting loose from where they are stuck. It is about development.”*

A bit later, Martin exclaims;

*“Wait, I’ll open the window. Can you see it?”*

“The sky?” It is rather late in the evening, and it is dark outside, making it difficult to identify the shapes of the surroundings.

*”No. There.”*

“A tower?”

*“Yes.”*

“A cross!!”

*“Yes, a huge cross!”*

“Amazing! Now I see it!”

*”And just imagine. There I am, I have come through the dark night, and I have entered a safe haven. And then I see that huge cross... Wherever I sit, it is just like, “hi there, welcome home!”*



Martin contemplates his crisis the last time we talk together:

*“It has been written a lot about, what is the difference between madness and the dark night of the soul, right? And they can slide a bit into each other.*

What are the distinctions? I ask.

*”It is strange, it has been written a lot about it, but I have never felt any curiosity or need to read about it. Because to me it has been so obvious that it has been a religious process. So it has never been, it has never occurred to me, I don’t bother to get into it. Because there is no doubt, as the Buddhists say, when you have tasted a banana it does not matter if anybody tells you it is bitter, you know what it tastes like! So if a psychologist should give me a book, telling me that no, you were crazy for two years, it would not.... No... There is nothing anybody can say.”*

Martin pauses, and goes to his bookshelf.

*“Up there are four journals filled with the experiences I have had. And there are just rows of strange, strange things. Experiences I had during that time.”*

“Like diaries?”

*“Yes.”*

“That’s interesting!”

*”Well, actually it is kind of scary. The episodes are pretty scary. It overwhelms you, sort of. And when you get out of it, it tapers off. I have nothing like that, there are no more large, strange things happening anymore. I believe it is like that for most people, when you get back to everyday life.*

*I have a book that is a little bit Buddhist; it is fun, “the way of the peaceful warrior”. The student asks the teacher if he can do fantastic things like flying and stuff. And he can. But the point is to be present. That is the true miracle. That’s what I experience, too. It is a bit tiresome to relate to such enormous experiences. It is a gift to have an ordinary life. Me and Zen are good friends. It is down to earth. I read a book, there was a metaphor I liked, it said that mystics look at the skies through the telescope. And then I thought, hey, that’s me! And then the next sentence was: But the Zen Buddhist looks at the telescope... And then I was like, hey, that’s me now! There are many Zen parables, addressing things like, what a miracle, I am chopping wood; I am carrying water, right...”*

“Looking at the diaries now, do you have the impression that you have been through a gradual process, or have there been certain turning points?”

*“I have a feeling that in the last instance it has been a very simple process. But for some reason it has taken an amazing amount of time! Point one; you get torn to pieces. Point two; you start to trust in God, not the world, not your own abilities. And then... a terribly long time: “Yes, but I need a job” and then no, you get hit in the head, “you jerk”, and then you get totally desperate. There is a lot back and fourth “no, I have to take care of myself”, “no, you don’t”, right, and every time, calming down, oh hell, breathing, and then something nice happens, someone calls, or something that moves you somehow. And, the impulse to take control, it runs deep, doesn’t it... And that is something you don’t talk about loud, people get wide-eyed and get angry in a way, totally wild; “yes, but you cannot do that! You have to take control!” Right... And then there is learning to have confidence. The other is, they go a bit hand in hand, being torn to pieces, and gradually learning, a struggle back and fourth, to have confidence. The third I would say is presence. It is living in the moment with gratitude.*

Martin pauses for a moment, and then he adds with an ironic laughter;

*“But in a way, when it comes to my own stages, I think I was just torn apart!”*

And he continues:

*“It was probably more that. Being emptied. Being emptied. I experienced that everything was washed out of me, all old dirt and shit, everything. Blah, I felt finished with it.*

*Or, rather, you don’t get finished with it...”*

It is as if Martin interrupts his own story, which seems to have acquired a will of its own, following its own logic, taking shape as a nice entity with a happy ending. Martin interrupts the flow; he tears it up by saying: *“when it comes to my own stages, I think I was just torn apart!”* And again with *“I felt finished with it”*, then interrupting himself; *“or rather, you don’t get finished with it...”* It is as if the medium of language, the story, has an internal drive towards some kind of system, a beginning, a middle and an end – hopefully a happy one. So when engaging in storytelling, Martin seems to get caught up by this, following the internal logic of the story until he reaches a point where he realizes that what he is saying now, no longer relates to his experience. So he interrupts the process. Experience and language intertwine. Yet, his experience of what has happened, regardless of how this experience is constituted, is not synonymous with the stories he can tell. Martin is relating to a ‘something’, and trying to construct stories that can communicate this ‘something’ to me. But the experience he wants to communicate is so much more complex than any story told can

capture. And yet, regardless of what processes have taken place, it has somehow ended up with things changing:

### 8.3.6 Resiliency, change, and letting go

Martin tells me that things have changed, things have settled. That, however, does not mean that he has found all the answers. For instance, he perceives some discrepancy between Christianity and what his own experience has taught him:

*“What I learnt, what I found difficult with Christianity, and that’s my great dilemma today, is that Christianity says something about doing good deeds. But my own personal experience from that time tells me that it is closer to the truth to be present, to quietly observe, and then do whatever the situation calls for. And that does not necessarily include being overwhelmingly loving, right? I have a personal conflict there that I struggle with a lot, also in my job. Because there are always so many demands; can you do like this, I cannot do this, I don’t know... Listening to my inner voice that tells me to “do this, don’t do that”. I have to sort that out. Because I sit there with Christianity, and it says that you should not think about yourself, you should just do that, like that. So I don’t know...”*

Martin still has an emphasis on “inner experience”, and there are aspects of Christianity that he sees as pulling in a different direction, a direction he does not feel is right. Martin is still reporting about, and from, a reality in which he has to navigate.

Martin tells me more about Taizé and the experiences he had there.

*“I came back from the US, and felt very lonely. When I went to Taizé I met a lot of Englishmen, I was very happy, and then they left, and I thought that was just terrible. I was very lonely, and I had also fallen in love with one of the English girls. So I went into the silence, and then you feel lonelier than ever. And that is the point. You are supposed to go into silence, just to experience. When you get through your original anxiety. By being alone you experience that you have everything. To receive you have to be lonely. And if you are in total isolation, in silence, and you have broken down all your defenses... To me it is about.... I am afraid that people may not love me, all the time. That I am never good enough. I am not exciting enough, I am not interesting enough, people do not love me, sort of. In loneliness you burn through all that. You get a place where there is rest.”*

Martin tells about factual matters, such as meeting Englishmen, and them leaving. He elaborates on his experience of being lonely when they left. This loneliness is then explicitly linked to his theological reflections, issues of epistemology and ontology. Being in isolation is pointed out as a prerequisite for getting to “*a place where there is rest*”. It is in isolation and silence that one’s defenses can be broken down and transformation take place, he tells me.

Martin continues:

*“I was sitting in that church in Taizé, being a bit bored, looking at an icon of Jesus and his disciples. It is a bit creepy: Suddenly I got a panic attack, it was as if the icon came closer and just ate me, I was sucked into that icon. And then I have the immediate mechanism of defense, to withdraw. But then I felt an immense peace. Like a voice saying, go into it, go ahead and dive into it! And then I did. And that’s when it started rolling. That’s when the crushing started! I cannot quite remember the process, yes, there was something that tore in my heart and my skull. That night I did not know what to do. I kept wandering around like all those poor bastards write about; Franz of Assisi was exposed to the same bedeviled thing.*

*So I walked around in a field, it just poured out of me, all the shit inside, I found a core in myself where I knew that I have found something terrible, that almost everything I did was about being a person worthy of love. I experienced that the way I behaved and talked, it all boiled down to this. No freedom at all. I was driven by a desperate attempt at being liked! My whole structure fell. What happened to my choices, I had no choices, I had just been going around thinking that I am a person who cannot be loved for who I am. The greatest fear is that if people see me, they cannot love me. In the middle of this chaos in a field, I was walking back and forth, I could not sit still. I did a simple cognitive exercise that I sometimes use in therapy; peeling the layers. But then I was totally peeled.... The onion was sort of all over the field...”*

“Peeling the layers? How does that cognitive exercise work?”

*“You ask simple questions, like, what is it that you fear? And you answer: you fear this and that. And then you ask yourself, what is so terrible about that? And you answer: it is this and that. But what is so terrible about that? It sounds strange, but you get deeper and deeper down, and find what the problem is actually about: Like, “I am so afraid I might not get a good job” – and what is so terrible about that? “I*

*cannot get a house and take care of myself” – and what is so terrible about that? “Then nobody likes me...” Peeling, peeling, peeling. And getting back to what it is really about. It is not about work, it is not about a house or anything. I am simply afraid that I will be a person that nobody will like.”*

“That’s a really neat method!”

*“But it does not always work, because there are so many mechanisms of defense. But at that specific time the onion was just broken, right. That’s when one can peel.”*

“And what do you do when you get to that realization, that you are afraid that nobody will love you? Do you repeat, “what is so terrible about that” again?”

*“Yes, I asked that. But that was it. It was no more. I felt that that’s what it was all about. Then it was this sense of peace and freedom. There was no more.”*

When working with the transcriptions of our conversations, I keep making the same discovery over and over again: that of how much is at stake in the project of seeking, and how little randomness is involved. Every one of the themes that Martin keeps coming back to are directly derived from his experience, and the choices he makes along the way likewise. I picture Martin walking in the field at night, peeling off layer after layer of his onion. There is no lightness about it. Martin meditates every day, he tells me. Meditation is depicted as hard work:

*“Relaxation is just relaxing from your problems. Meditation is the opposite. You concentrate intensely, all the powers in your mind, one point mind, you are totally present. And you are more awake, but more relaxed. You are actually not relaxed, but totally present, without reacting. Relaxation is the same as taking Valium; you are dazed and don’t care what happens. Meditation implies the greatest possible degree of presence and absence simultaneously. You are present a hundred percent and you see everything that happens, but you are not emotionally pulled into it. Meditation is the diametrical opposite of relaxation.”*

He elaborates upon the value of meditation, and this is done by relating it to the everyday challenges of life, by showing its relevance for issues that he struggles with, at the same time as he draws on his knowledge as a psychologist:

*“The word libido, the power of life, in psychological language, meditation is drawing it inside. All your libido. In psychology you talk about putting your energy in things, in people, in your work: she must like me, he must like me; otherwise it has consequences. So my energy is actually put into that person. My energy is put into my*

*work. If work does not go well, I feel pain. My energy is put outside of me. Things on the outside are allowed to pull your threads. Meditating is about pulling all those threads inside of yourself. You pull all your libido inside. Otherwise you are just inside a prison. You are dependent. You are a marionette, right? A string is pulled, and you fall down, and you might as well hang yourself. And that's what people call living.....!*

*The verse from the Bible becomes meaningful: seek first His Kingdom and then everything else will be given to us. It is the same principle. There is a peace, you become safe. Now that I have wandered that path a bit, I see that there is no way back. I don't have any wish to become ordinary again. A monk I talked to in Taizé said that when you come to God, you still have the same problems, but now they are secondary. That's how I feel. I still have a lot of problems. [ ] But even when it almost overwhelms me, I have this feeling that it is secondary. There is something better, much more important that exists. There is a trust that has been built up over time, and that power brings me back. I still struggle with a lot of things. Neurosis, depressed one day, anxiety the next. Something that did not turn out the way I wanted. That feeling returns. Ok, but it is secondary."*

Martin reports "having the same problems as before", but that his experience of them has changed, as he now sees them as secondary. Or rather, he tells of the ongoing project of practicing, repeating and reminding himself of what comes first, and what is merely secondary. It is not like he has reached Nirvana, he still has to relate to the challenges of everyday life. But not as the work of Sisyphus: he reports experiencing change for the better. It just takes such a long time.

Martin elaborates on the experience of meditation by way of comparing it with what goes on in therapy:

*"The idea is that most of what your body does when you are meditating, is just resistance. That restlessness, wanting to get up and think about stuff, that is a challenge, it is resistance. The way to handle it is to sit through it. You become quiet. But in the beginning it is a mortal combat. Your ego is fighting for its life. There are parts of you saying, this is killing us! And that discomfort is right. I really believe it is. I also see it in therapy. The rule is, the patient comes and says that "I need help with this". The rest of the therapy is spent getting into your head that you have to give yourself up. What we think is "us" is so deeply ingrained in us. It feels like someone is trying to take it away from you, it is just inhumane, sort of. It is crazy, you don't*

*want to die; you don't want to give it up. The idea in Zen is that the restlessness... in therapy it is just a sign of resistance towards that process, to let it go."*

"Sensing you are dying, a metaphor"

*"Well, it is not as much a metaphor as it is real. It is a real feeling. You are dying! There are parallels to therapy. People go to these centers because they want to change. But the moment they see that change is possible, they leave... It takes a certain level of trust. You have to go through it to get to the other side, and then you feel much better. You have to dare to do it. It is pure hell. My experience is that confidence develops along the way. You catch a glimpse sometimes, sort of, of that trust. You let go of something. And you see glimpses, sort of. Those glimpses become larger and occur at shorter intervals. You gradually let go and confidence seeps in, and gradually confidence undermines the fear of hell that life is. Personally, and I will say personally, because it may be the same for others, and it may be different for others. I would never just give myself to someone who asked me to trust them."*

Martin says that next to Christianity, Zen is his closest friend. He looks through his bookshelves and pulls out a couple of books:

*"Ah, here are the old samurai teachings! When you become a Mujadin you consider yourself dead, you have given up yourself. You live for the cause only. It is really dangerous, they consider themselves dead. It is the same as Christianity, actually, the one clinging to his life shall lose it; the one who gives his life for me shall win it. Only when you totally let go of yourself, that's when you find life. That's the paradox. It is when you let yourself go that you find life."*

Martin is back to what has been his major theme of elaboration for two whole years: non-control. From talking about not being able to change yourself, about opening up for processes that "grab you" and change you, he underlines the point even more by talking about letting go to the extent of giving your life, because only through this total surrender, by losing your life, you can find it, he says.

*"The inner peace is absolutely central to me, finding it. And I often wonder, I believe that people have different experiences, I see people who are very concerned about controlling the world, out there, go get them, - and it does not work at all. It absolutely does not work at all. Whereas when I withdraw, when I manage to quiet down the impulse to control, and manage to find that silence, then... So that is the key to me. It is clearly contemplative. Mystic, I do not like that word. It sounds very hocus pocus. But contemplative... I would say that without Christ nothing goes*

*around for me. And yet, I would say that of even more importance is the accomplishment of the inner silence. Because that's where I experience the connection. To God. To myself."*



## 9. More stories on seeking

### 9.1 *Introduction*

In the previous chapter I presented stories about seeking in detail. Doing so, as opposed to presenting life-stories in bits and pieces, draws attention to the coherence and internal logic of the individual stories, and has implications for how the quests of our informants can be understood. These are issues I will return to in the final chapter. In this chapter I will continue by presenting more stories about seeking, to provide an empirical basis for my final reflections. However, presenting every interview in all its splendid detail turned out to counteract my intentions. I was concerned that the reader might not see the wood for the trees. I realized that I had to compromise, well aware of the paradoxes inherent in my decision. I decided to keep a couple of stories about seeking intact, and I chose the stories of Marit and Martin for reasons previously explained. When presenting the other stories about seeking, I choose merely to zoom into parts that introduce new elements. I also aim at providing enough examples to show the way certain elements were indeed repeated. I am making a selection from different stories about seeking, in ways that I hope can draw attention to individual twists and styles of narrating, as well as recurring patterns. I do so to pursue the analytical points in the final chapter in a more reader-friendly manner.

As in the previous chapter, the conversations I present here were with people I met at different Buddhist meditations, courses and retreats. Though I cannot claim to know any of these people well, I met all of them on several occasions, in addition to when conducting narrative interviews. Some of us also attended summer courses at KSL together, courses that lasted for two to three days at a time, occasions where people would sleep side by side in sleeping bags, make food, eat, do the dishes, meditate, sing, talk as well as being quiet together. This means that when having the conversations that I am about to present, it was not the first time we met. I will call these informants Rannveig, Inger, Johan, Hans and Elisabeth. They were all born between 1965 and 1980, just like Marit, Martin and myself.

## 9.2 Rannveig

Rannveig is a woman my own age, whom I met at KTLBS. We also met at a summer course, where we slept in the same little cabin. As she lives outside of Oslo, we agreed to meet at a restaurant where we had the following conversation. I only had this one narrative interview with Rannveig. When I later tried to contact her for a follow-up interview, she had moved, and I was not able to trace her. I met her again years later, in the funeral of the Dharma-group teacher. So at the time when I was finishing my thesis, I was able to contact her and get her acceptance regarding the way I had chosen to perform my analysis.

### 9.2.1 Being drawn, belonging and recognition

Rannveig tells me that she did not have any specific religious upbringing, but she has always been fascinated by religion. I ask her why that is so, and she answers:

*“I have always been drawn towards the mystic and the occult. I became interested in astrology when I was 13-14, started reading about it. It is about finding something you cannot see, the meaning of things, how things are connected; I experienced being drawn towards that. Being a teenager was a tough time, being like the others, I felt that so much was not me, so I felt very lonely through high school. So it was sort of a comfort, something that added meaning to things. So. Hmmm...”*

Rannveig tells me about an interest in finding out about the interconnection between things, the meaning of things, and that this was why she became interested in religion. Another aspect of her quest she explains as being caused by her time as a teenager, which she found to be a tough time. The pointing out of something as being at stake is something she has in common with all my informants. She engaged in seeking because she was facing challenges in her life. Something that makes her story differ is that she started out with an interest in *the mystic* and *the occult*. These elements are absent in the stories of for instance Marit and Martin. *What* Rannveig tells me is interesting in itself. *The way* she tells it is equally interesting. She says that at high school she felt that “*so much was not me*”. This way of explaining, by defining something as ‘me’ or ‘not me’, and presenting this distinction as an important one I recognize as a pattern in the stories of all my informants. What is more, she talks about feeling *drawn to*. I have pointed out how Marit as well as Martin uses expressions that conjure up a tactile reality. This is an element that turns out to be even more prominent in Rannveig’s story.

Rannveig pauses for a moment, and then she bursts out:

*“I really don’t know why I became interested in religion, actually! But I have been drawn towards everything from the East. When I was about fifteen nobody I knew had actually been there, but I knew that I was going to India one day, without actually knowing very much about it. So when my cousin offered me to join him, I naturally went. There was an astrologer who said that you have lived many of your former lives over there, you have been sitting there meditating... and when I came over there, I just felt that this is where I belong!”*

Rannveig laughs heartily. Just like Martin interrupted himself when realizing that his story infused events with a logic and structure that did not correspond with the experience he attempts to narrate, Rannveig interrupts herself. She reports being uncertain about the complexity regarding causality, but the part about *“being drawn to”* remains. The element of travels as an important part of the story is a pattern I recognize from talking to my other informants, with the concept of *“the East”* as well as places like *“India”*.

I ask Rannveig if she found any of the caves where she presumably had been meditating, but she says no. However, she reports that she felt that *“this is where I belong”*. Again a pattern is confirmed: talking about sensing *recognition* and *belonging* is a way of talking that I found among all my informants. My first thought was that this could be connected to ideas of reincarnation, but when I ask Rannveig about that, she answers:

*“I am not very concerned about that stuff about former lives. Actually, I don’t even know if I believe in it. But there are certain places in the worlds where one just feels more belonging; there are types of energies and atmospheres that are more recognizable. There are places I am drawn to, and other places where I don’t feel at home. I don’t know if it has anything to do with former lives. That is kind of very, New Age, you get very focused on stuff regarding former lives. And future lives. Personally I don’t find that very interesting. I don’t even know if I believe in reincarnation. There is something more to life, but I don’t know what.”*

Again Rannveig talks about *belonging*, *recognition*, *being drawn to*, as well as *feeling at home* versus *not feeling at home* as an important distinction. It is not a question of beliefs, she says. She paints a reality she can *sense* connection with. Rannveig reports navigating a reality where an important part of her navigational equipment seems to be her bodily senses: being touched, being drawn.

### 9.2.2 The body and “walking my path”

Due to her interest in religion she traveled in India and Nepal when she was about nineteen, she stayed, for instance, at a Buddhist monastery for a month, and took teachings in Nepal:

*“It just took totally off! There was so much new with Karma and meditations, I really got to experience it through my body. So when I came home, the only thing I wanted to study was religion, the history of religion.”*

“*Experience it through my body*” – again she narrates events she finds significant by referring to the experience as embodied. She tells me that studying religion was a change of plans, as academic studies was something that she earlier had conceived of as “*intellectual and boring*”, as she laughingly puts it. She had rather been into art, taken classes in drawing and painting, and the idea was to become a painter or a ceramicist. Instead, she decided to pursue her religious interests by studying mysticism at the university. Just like Marit and Martin, she points out that whatever activity she engages in, it has to be perceived as relevant, and this sense of relevance is portrayed as one of sensing connection: it has to be “*me*”, it has to be “*experienced through my body*” – it must *draw* her and it must *touch* her. Like my other informants, Rannveig has an understanding of different religions as having the same core:

*“I sense that mysticism, you go into the core of every religion, both Sufi mysticism, Christian mysticism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism, there is something that I feel very drawn to, that is very exciting. I think it tells a lot about the core of religion. There is so much recognizable stuff in these mystic traditions”.*

The way Rannveig talks about her interest in religion, she seems to be experiencing some kind of gravitation, a pull. She speaks as if something is emanating from the phenomena themselves. The world she conjures up seems like a living organism.

I ask Rannveig, what was it like, studying religion, compared to the personal interest you have in these issues?

*“The curriculum was very analytic, from the outside, sort of. What stages you find, how it can be compared to other traditions. A lot became very theoretical compared to my personal experience. But I enjoyed having both, because just engaging in this kind of stuff personally; things may begin to blur... It is about gaining perspective on things. I don’t feel that there was any kind of contradiction there, necessarily. There were texts written by mystics, and I took that subject, nobody else did. So I sat a lot all my by myself, reading, at the university, at home. I went into existential stuff, I picked up what I found inspiring, there were not a lot of others*

*to discuss it with. There was a teacher who was especially interested in mysticism. I enjoyed seeing things in an academic perspective also. I cannot just go into the religious stuff, I like to have both. It gives more: it gives a basis and a sense of thoroughness. Research into the issues, what researchers say, not just my personal stuff. I feel that I could easily go into that, not falling into reverie, but it becomes so emotional, and I like to weigh it up against, inside the academic and outside of it. Weigh stuff up against each other. That is also what I wrote about in my thesis."*

Rannveig talks about different kinds of knowledge, and she says that both are valuable. It is a question of balance, she says: she needs both perspectives, the insider as well as the outsider perspective. In talking about balance as important, she is very much in line with the rest of my informants.

*"A lot of the people I studied with wrote about New Age, and many traditions. But they have never attended a single meeting, they have not experienced it themselves, they are writing from an outsider's perspective. I find that totally uninteresting. I feel that anything I write about I have to have experienced personally, too. But there is also a conflict there, when I was working with my major. I felt I was engaging in two different... I was sort of criticizing myself, outside inside. It became a little conflict. I was in a group, it was about self development, I pick a little here and a little there. It is typical New Age. I meditate and stuff. And at the same time I was writing a thesis where I felt like exposing New Age... what it is, how they use science... I felt that I was criticizing myself, what I was doing. So I had to cut it out for a while, to be able to finish my thesis! Because what I saw, there was too much of a conflict. I cut it out to function intellectually, to get the distance I needed to finish".*

"Did you start engaging in these things again?"

*"Yes, now I feel free to do so. I am no longer tied up by the academic. Now I am engaging in massages and healing and all that stuff, at the same time as I feel a little... I engage in seeking, at the same time as I have to be academic at my job. I felt a little tied up when doing my thesis, I was afraid that I would not be academic enough. I felt a little tied up. But I believe that if I had studied today, I would have felt more free, because now I know what I stand for".*

Merely academic knowledge is something Rannveig says is *"not that interesting"*. She says that academic knowledge on religion alone misses out on *"what it is all about"*. As a practitioner of meditation and yoga, she felt that studying New Age as an academic was a conflicting experience. However, she also reports that this was partly due to her tender age

and inexperience at the time, now she “*knows what she stands for*”. Later in our conversation she returns to this change:

*“I feel that I have more acknowledged the value of walking my own path, doing my own thing. [ ] I acquire inspiration. I do meditate, almost every day, but not necessarily Buddhist meditation, it is more my own stuff, which I have learnt other places.”*

Rannveig tells me that she has come to appreciate the importance of “*walking one’s own path*” more and more. She as well as Marit tells about a development in which they have become more and more capable of doing so, and they tell me about their conscious strategies to move further in that direction.

### **9.2.3 Movement, unrest and belonging**

Just like Marit, Rannveig has traveled a lot. And just like Marit, she reports a need to do so. Martin has traveled a bit, too, but he does not express the need to be on the move like the two women. Rannveig, as well as Marit, seems to equate being on the move with freedom:

*“I wanted out, freedom, and, and, then I first went to France, Spain and North Africa, and I was gone for a year, and just felt how wonderful it was to travel. Then my cousin asked me if I wanted to go to Nepal. I felt that I wanted to go there, and said yes, of course. I lived together with people in Nepal, and then I wanted to go to India, so I went to India alone and traveled around. But it was this feeling of, travel very much, I did not want a steady job, and I don’t, I didn’t want to live a steady place, have a steady relationship, steady stuff like that. I could not settle, there was some kind of unrest. Frustrating, too. Now that I am 36, what is to become of my life, what should I do now, settle down – and then I just feel that I want to be on the go. Just staying for a week in Smallville, then the unrest comes, and I have to go to Oslo. And then I am here a little bit, I drive, I have to be on the road all the time. I see that I have experienced a lot, I have had the opportunity to travel a lot, at the same time as I wonder, when is peace going to come, if it ever comes!”*

Rannveig almost talks herself out of breath when saying this, and the way she talks underlines her message: not only does she say that she has to be on the move, but her story moves with a fierce intensity as well when saying it. Later in our conversation she returns to the issue of traveling again:

*“It was just like “I have to travel I have to travel”. So when I studied, I took exams during fall, and traveled a bit during springtime. I spent a lot of my study loan*

*traveling, actually. Then I got a boyfriend from the USA whom I met in India, we traveled a couple of times to Central-America, I used every opportunity to travel. And when I traveled, I always, always sought out religious stuff; pyramids in Mexico, and Egypt, and holy places. That is the kind of stuff that I sought out.”*

“Like a pilgrimage”

*“Yes, like a modern pilgrim!”*

Rannveig laughs.

*“And in India, ashrams, places for meditation, places with some mystique. That’s the focus of my travels. So I feel, it is not interesting just to travel to see new places, but it has to have something to do with my path, sort of”*

Rannveig is back to the importance of her travels as being related to *“her path”*. Rannveig as well as Marit seems to be working on making the world a place of belonging, into something they are part of, that is also part of them.

Rannveig presently holds a teaching position, but settling down in this way did not come easy to her, she says. For a long time she did not want a steady job. Neither does she want to settle down regarding relationships and find a partner. Marit demonstrates unsettlement by changing boyfriends ever so often during the two-year-period we talk, and she elaborates on the difficulties she experiences regarding *“losing herself”* in relationships. Rannveig repeats Marit’s pattern of thematizing relationships, but she does not merely point out challenges regarding having a boyfriend, she actually expresses reluctance, ambivalence, even opposition, towards monogamy. She reports struggling with opposing concerns and needs, those of her own, as well as those of others, as well as the issue of deciding which is which – what does *she* want, and what concerns are being shoved upon her by others? Rannveig talks about movement and unrest. She ponders issues of settling down, contra being on the go. What should she do, she asks herself. Will there ever be peace? And, does she want it? She depicts a situation where she is unsettled, inside as well as outside, an unrest that also manifests itself in her taking literally to the road.

“Do you wish for peace to come, or is it more that you feel it ought to come?”

*“In a way I have wished for it, it is very much related to me thinking that I should settle down. I do get a bit hung up on my age, I see that more and more girlfriends settle down, they get a house, and everyone around me gets... and I don’t. So I think that I should settle down. I think that I should settle down. But I don’t know how much it is my own wish, or how much it is that it is expected of me now. Or what I*

*am expected to do because I have reached a certain age. Especially this last year I have become a lot like, shall I ever settle down like everybody else... But there is also a wish to find my place, some kind of belonging. I don't have any sense of belonging, not to a home, not to a place. Or Oslo, where I feel the most belonging. But I don't have anything, I don't have a steady place to live, I have never gone for that. So, I don't quite know what belonging is... But then I imagine that I want to live, I don't just want an ordinary nuclear family with a house and apartment and stuff, it seems so sad in a way. I would like, in a way, some kind of spiritual center, to be part of a community."*

Rannveig says that she want to "live". When looking at her story in retrospect, I see that the way she talks, the implication seems to be that settling down is equated with *dying*, at least with the possibility of dying. Again there is a parallel to Marit's story, her fear of committing "drawn out suicide". Both of these women express the fear of some kind of loss that relationships pose the threat of entailing.

#### **9.2.4 Having one's own life**

When pondering the issue of settling down, Rannveig is on the lookout for alternatives, like a spiritual center:

*"I like being in groups, because at the same time it is not that committing. Going to courses at KTL and stuff, I go to educational groups four times a year, and I would like to live like that. It is a feeling of being part of a community, at the same time as I can leave and have my own space, or that way to live. I like that. Being in a fellowship with others who seek the same as I do. And, yes... And then I feel a lot of freedom in the groups where I go, freedom to be myself, to withdraw when I need to, I feel a lot of need for that. At the same time as I only want to be with others when I want to. So I would like to live like that."*

Rannveig points out her need to have her own space, and the importance of "freedom to be myself". Compared to my male informants, both Marit and Rannveig exemplify the greater interest that I found among the females in trying out alternative ways of living. Marit expresses a general concern about others as exerting pressure, a recurring theme throughout the two years in which we had our conversations. Rannveig gets into issues of pressure as well, but more specifically directed towards marriage and having kids.

Rannveig elaborates on the alternative of communal living:



*“It is about balance... I don’t know if I would bother to start something like that, but just going into something that was already established, yes. I feel sometimes, at times I wonder where my basis is supposed to be. It has been alright until now, it is about three or four years ago since I finished my studies. I am on a way. And I have got a job. So I think that maybe I now have to find out of things.... But maybe I don’t need to.”*

She laughs.

*“I feel expectations in my family and all kinds of stuff...”*

“I can relate to that...”

*“Yes, I see girlfriends going into their relationship, isolating themselves, becoming so very much twosome. When there are so many other ways of being engaged with other people. But I do feel that I could use someone to sharpen myself on through everyday living. I think I miss that. However, when I am in it, I mainly just find it tiresome...”*

We both laugh.

*“And then I want out!!! I notice I become a bit hung up, because my dad is old, he is like; a woman is not that much without a man. He does not say that, but it is very much like you are supposed to meet a man who can give you a position in society. And I have always heard about women in the family who did not marry, who were a bit weird. Who were “too independent for a woman”... You should not become such an old spinster, something very virginal... I have these ideas that maybe I’ll become one like that, that this is the way they look at me. And then I think that “God, I have to...” I tend to mix what they are thinking, with the issue of being satisfied with my life.”*

“It can be hard to distinguish your own wishes from what others want”

*“Expectations kind of... At home I have always proclaimed that I only want to study and study, and that I will never get married or have kids! I met my dad and his girlfriend, and then they say, wouldn’t it be nice to have a boyfriend... Boyfriend!!! What are you supposed to do with that!!! There are only idiots out there!!! And I do so much better without...”*

Rannveig laughs.

*“I notice that girlfriends that are having babies, I feel that is tough to take now. Especially one girlfriend, we have been like, traveling a lot together, she has never had a proper boyfriend, she has been free, and, suddenly she is having a baby! I had never thought that would happen to her. I almost just quit having any contact with her. I feel it is like, it is like, I did not think that this is how it would be, that she*

would experience that, she calls me and tells me that she has been to medical checkups, and, I just, oh yeah, I have also been to the doctor... I ignore, I cannot stand to talk about that she has, that she is having, a baby. It just happens that way, it is sad not to have any contact with her, I am usually not into that.

My little sister also had a baby, she is five years younger than me. But that is like, she has had a boyfriend for a long time, and she has talked about wanting a baby, and I said that, I think you should work a little and wait a little. When she told me it was a little hard immediately, but now it is like, I find it just nice. I was with her yesterday, and I saw that it was such a hassle... The baby needs attention all the time. She does not get any time for herself. And I don't know if that is what I want... But it is nice in the family that there is a child. Mmm. That my dad should experience becoming a grandfather... That is very much ok.

But with my girlfriend, we have never talked about husbands and children; we have had totally different kinds of conversations. And I think that now she is just concerned about her belly and her kid, so there is nothing more to talk about. I don't know whether it is just my fear of being rejected, or of her talking about stuff I don't know anything about. That makes it difficult. Yes."

Later on in our conversation, Rannveig returns to the issue of settling down:

"My grandmother had a cousin, she died the year I was born, she became a hundred years old. She never married. She was into anthroposophy, traveled around and lived different places. She was a town original... I always imagine that I might become like that!"

Rannveig laughs.

"She was funny. At that time, being into anthroposophy and being a woman and living like that, it was quite unusual. It is a bit ok to have someone in the family, women who lived differently, who weren't poor spinsters, but who had their own life. It is a lot about what you think that other people think... It is easy to think that others feel sorry for you."

Rannveig talks about her present status as single, and challenges regarding what other people think. Even though she expresses the possibility that she may be wrong in believing that other people feel sorry for her, the fact that she thematizes her single status on her own initiative tells a story in itself, about her single status as something that has to be thematized, about her single status as something not in accordance with expectations she experiences in her surroundings.

What Rannveig says here lends support to the observations Gordon makes (1994). Gordon claims that single women are still marginalized in the familist societies, and that many of them experience multiple marginalization. The mere existence of singletons challenges marginality and develop “outsider-within” standpoints, she says, discerning how tensions between separateness and connectedness, between independence and intimacy pose a tightrope for single women. Rannveig’s elaborations seem to be an illustration of this phenomenon. Gordon points out that “sidestepping pressures towards marriage involves gains as well as losses”, and ends her analysis by quoting one of her informants comparing a single woman “with a horse running free” (Gordon 1994:198). Indeed, Rannveig, as well as Marit, talks in terms of sensing a freedom they are not certain they could give up. Rannveig refers to her grandmother’s cousin as a strong personality, as someone living differently, and as a woman “*who had her own life*”. To “*have one’s own life*” is a theme in Rannveig’s narrative, a concern that resonates very much with Marit’s concerns.

### 9.2.5 Tools for living and the body

Just like my other informants, Rannveig is very pragmatic when it comes to her approach to Buddhism. When asking her if she considers Buddhism a religion, philosophy, or something else, she answers:

*“Because of having read and studied Buddhism as a religion, I see it as a religion from the outside. At a personal level, however, it is also a philosophy with a lot of psychology in it, a way to live. Things that can be used.”*

She reports Buddhism as providing tools that can be put to work. But Buddhism is not the only tradition she draws upon. She has been seeking in many different new religious alternative movements, she tells me. For instance, she has made good use of Transcendental Meditation and yoga. She reports that especially before exams it has been useful to practice these techniques to become “*more concentrated and focused*”.

*“I am able to use whatever is for me, without having to go totally into the tradition. So I feel that I use things a bit more freely here and there.”*

Just like Martin, Rannveig emphasizes how nice it is to just to “*sit and breathe*”, precisely because she has “*studied these things so much with my head*”. I ask her what kind of techniques she is practicing now:

*“I have learnt a few Meditational practices that focus upon chakras. Getting in touch with chakras and breath in it, a lot of energy exercises, also in connection with the education I am taking now, the center that I have been at, I started going there seven, eight years ago, it is a lot back and fourth, they also have Zen meditation, and in periods that is what I have been doing, breathing, just following my breath, and then there are energy exercises, starting processes, so I have in a way followed up stuff that I have learnt there. And then I have been doing TM, because I feel that I have so much to do, I write and I teach, and I have a lot of stress in my head. And when I do that mantra meditation there is something in my head that calms down. I have started doing that lately again, but I have been away from it for a while. But there is always some kind of meditational form that I practice. A lot of the things that I have learnt are so complicated, there are so many stages. Doing yoga I learnt to breathe in, and to sense the different chakras. But I feel like coming back to something very simple, just following my breath. So what Roar said, about just sitting and breathing, the simpler the better; that is what I want to come back to. It feels like the simple is more direct.”*

Rannveig continues:

*“When we were in Nepal we learnt a lot about seeing, visualizing Buddha, different divinities that were supposed to come and send energy into our bodies, we visualized processes of death and stuff like that. It was, it is nice, but it is pretty complicated to move on with.”*

“Processes of death?”

*“The Tibetan book of dying, it describes what happens, white and red light, and, yes, after you die, Bardo, you visualized how you were sucked down into new bodies, and there was a lot of talk about death and death-consciousness. There was practice regarding knowing what happens when you die, so that you can face death. That is something that fascinates me a lot with Tibetan Buddhism, that there is a lot, death and the book of dying and consciousness around it.”*

Bardo is a Tibetan word which means transitional state or in-between-state. I have been explained that the concept of Bardo often refers to the state of existence between two lives on earth. But more importantly, according to many of my informants, it is used to refer to any period in-between. Dreaming, dying and after-death, indeed life itself can be conceived of as Bardo, as it takes place in between birth and death (as well as in between other lives). Any experience in life, as feelings of uncertainty, can be seen as Bardo. Central to the phenomenon of Bardo, is that it is understood as offering great opportunity for liberation and

spiritual progress, Bardo is the name of what is understood as an opportunity to gain insight, to achieve transformation.

I tell Rannveig that the concept of Bardo also appealed to me, that it gave me a way of living with death in life. Rannveig says:

*“Yes, I could look it in the eyes, that the whole time there are little deaths. I would like to do a thesis on that, I have experienced a lot, my mother is dead, my aunt is dead, and I was there when they died. I have felt a lot of it. I have been fascinated by it, what is death in different traditions? And I am very frightened by it. At the same time it attracts me to go into it, if you really could, if you could look it in the eyes without fear then there is a lot of life in it. I remember in Nepal, when meditating on death, I felt that there was something in life that became so much more present, or, it became so strong. It gave a lot more presence, sort of. I also feel that more and more I dwell on breath and my body. When I practice massages and things like that, you sink into your body, you are present, it is easy to see how much I have been outside of my body, I have read a lot about mystical stuff that has been exciting, but it is a bit floating up there to me. It is not quite related to the actual life. But just sinking into your body, feeling your breath.”*

The body is a central recurring theme in her story. Directly: by pointing out the importance of the body, and indirectly: by the activities she chooses to engage in, and by the way she narrates a tactile reality.

### **9.2.6 Cultivating awareness and the body as map**

*“When I went back to that Buddhist center this summer, it was Tara that I became fascinated by. I went into Tanum and bought a book called “longing for darkness”, it is about a woman who traveled around and felt drawn to Tara and the black Madonna. And she started to combine the two of them. It was a lot about her story that fascinated me, the green Tara, who represents compassion, and then I felt that there is something about the green, and the heart. And then KTL arranged a course about “the heart”, and I felt that it was meant that I should go there. So I just called and asked if there still was room, and it was, naturally I could just come. And then there is something about Tara, and the way to the heart, I felt that I was supposed to go to that course. That is how I came back.”*

Rannveig talks about these events as if they were meant to be. Whether this purpose and plan comes from without or within Rannveig, one thing seems certain in her story: what happens does not happen at random. The way she narrates adds to the depiction of a reality in which the things themselves have the power to move, to pull, to unfold her path. To me her task seems to be one of recognizing the signs, of entering into communication with ‘the things themselves’. She returns to this issue later on in our conversation:

*“I think that it becomes more and more, it is not an accident that I meet this and that person. I see signs! And suddenly I see that things get less and less accidental.”*

Through engaging in practices of meditation and other techniques cultivating bodily awareness, Rannveig reports developing her sensitivity for picking up and *listening to signals* and *discerning signs*. She tells me that she sees more and more connections, she sees more and more signs, and the things themselves become less and less accidental. Again, she talks about her body as if it was a navigational instrument, and she talks about the ability to use her senses this way as something that can be cultivated, opening up reality as a new realm of exploration. Having talked about seeing signs, she specifies:

*“But I am not the kind of person who thinks that everything that happens was supposed to happen. I think one has the opportunity to choose things away. [ ] But I believe that when you are seeking along a spiritual path and get contact there, things will become less accidental. Because, if you are ready for something, then things will come to you, that are supposed to come to you.”*

Again, the world she relates to is portrayed as being alive: “things” can “come to you”. And indeed, they will, if you are seeking along a spiritual path, she tells me.

*“But I don’t believe that everything is supposed to happen. [ ] When I was in India, a lot of poor people said that it was their Karma, it was a lot of hierarchical thinking. It is just a way of defending, of sweeping problems under the carpet. I don’t like that much.”*

### **9.2.7 Gender, sensuality and balance**

Rannveig’s fascination with Tara is interesting. Tara is one of several female Buddhas in the Tibetan tradition, and during fieldwork I heard Tara being pointed out as one of the earliest feminists. The story goes that she was born a princess, developing great merit through offerings and prayers. The monks told her that they would pray she be reborn a man. But Tara answered that there was no male and no female, that nothing really existed, and she

vowed to serve in female form until every living being reached enlightenment. I also learnt that Tara has many forms. She is not only fierce, but she is colored: dark blue, blue-black or black. The way Tara is presented she is a reverse image of the pictures I saw in childhood, of God as a white male. Tara is depicted as a strong, dynamic, dark and female divinity. Rannveig was not the only woman expressing fascination of Tara. I heard more general statements at a couple of summer courses, that there should have been a statue of Tara at the Buddhist center. By referring to Tara, Rannveig is once again thematizing the issue of gender.

Rannveig returns to the body as important, and the issue of balance, in this case between pleasing the senses and what she calls Puritanism. She tells me about attending a study group at KSL, and describes how good it felt to sit in front of the fireplace at KSL in the middle of winter:

*“All those colors... I like all the colors and the incense and rituals. And I like that there is a lot of stuff surrounding it. I feel that Tibetan Buddhism and Catholicism has something that I like. [ ] It is beautiful to look at, and it appeals to everything”*

“Using the whole sensing body”

*“Yes. I have also been a bit into that Osho stuff, there is quite a bit of it there. There is a lot that appeals to the body and the senses. It can become a bit too much in that direction too, though...”*

“Too much, how?”

*“In India, at the Osho center, it is a lot like, it can be a bit too focused upon sex and body and pleasure. But at the same time it is very appealing, I have been to other ashrams, where people just sit and meditate, men and women are not supposed to talk to each other, nobody touches each other, and then I come to Osho, where there is a total living it up with body, soul and everything. It was not that everybody engaged in sex, but it was in the air. I liked it. Aesthetic, beautiful, colors and everything is there, nothing is denied. There is something about Buddhism that can be a bit too puritan. Yes. Mmm.”*

Rannveig expresses concern and reluctance towards traditional ways of organizing relationships, into ‘self-sufficient’ monogamous couples. She is skeptical towards institutions. But she embraces the importance of the body, the senses and the sensual. And as many other informants with her, she emphasizes the importance of *balance*.

## 9.3 Inger

*“It is a very liberating perspective, the concepts that Buddhism presents. It can really turn your way of thinking upside down. For instance, the Dalai Lama says that the body is like a hotel room. Can you imagine anything that impersonal! I see a lot of constructivism in it. When you read constructivist literature, you get the sense that one can just replace one construction with another. Of course, constructivism is practiced in a society, you cannot just change it. And yet, you see that it is not a given that things have to be this way or that. So you can change things, the way you think about things.”*

I met Inger at several summer courses at KSL. She was in her mid-twenties, and working with her major in sociology. The conversation I am presenting parts of here took place at a research institute where she was working at the time.

### 9.3.1 Seeking, finding and growing

Inger reports having been doing a little yoga, she was into ACEM in eighth grade, and two years ago she started going to a beginner’s course at KTLBS. At the time of our conversation she attends a course for advanced learners. The issue that she expresses most concern with during our conversation is whether to commit to a certain tradition or not, and if so – which tradition:

*“It is sort of a question, you know, whether you should be part of it, or if you should just practice by yourself. I had been doing a bit on my own, before I went to America. There I first encountered Vipassana, taught by a teacher. It is a bit less philosophical than Tibetan Buddhism. It is more direct. It is a different way of teaching. So I have stuck a bit to that. One gets a little confused when there are so many different kinds... In America I practiced for eight months, I was also in a Zen center, and got a taste of that. It was a bit accidental. “Some people belong here, and some people belong there”, people would say, “but there is no doubt, you belong here...” I do not regret it. But there is always a question of commitment. Committing to one thing and the other. And to me, the choice is about, there are so many different angles. I have to continue with one of the angles that I feel is more right than the others. It is difficult to know what to do.”*

When I ask Inger if she considers herself a Buddhist or a seeker or what, she answers:



*“I guess I would have to say both”*

Inger tells me about growing up with parents who were active in something called Subud, which she explains as some kind of new religious movement; a mixture between Islam and Christianity.

*“It became a bit spaced out, so I don’t think any of us [siblings] would consider joining that. But that is the background of my seeking, or finding, or, well, yes...”*

I note how Inger says *“my seeking, or finding”*. Not only does she explicitly express being at a parting of the ways, where she feels she has to decide whether to commit to a tradition or not, but the way she talks reflects a field of tension, between seeking and finding.

She tells me that through her parents’ engagement in Subud, she became familiar with certain concepts and practices early on. And even though she expresses a certain skepticism towards the group her parents belonged to, mentioning the possibility of a corrupt leader, and that *“it was not very balanced”*, she points out that

*“It is nice, because it has opened a lot of doors to me. It becomes just child’s play to come to a new place, that you sit down with your legs crossed and stuff, you have kind of been there before. It is not alien. And maybe it has provided me with openness for exploring other things. It is about including ideas of earlier lives, ideas about the soul and stuff. Even if they are not concepts you use actively, they are there”*

Though growing up in a country that is officially defined as a Christian country, Christianity has always been alien to her, she tells me.

*“I was never able to identify with Jesus. Maybe with God. But it became so dogmatic and stiff, it was not alive. It was fun to draw pictures from the Old Testament and stuff, but when you came to the age where you were being confirmed, well, it did not make me grow.”*

What Inger does here, is something that I also find in the stories of my other informants. She emphasizes movement, life and development, by saying that she experienced Christianity as *“not alive”*, but *“dogmatic and stiff”*, concluding that *“it did not make me grow”*. Dogma is generally portrayed as opposed to what is *“alive”* by all of my informants. After having expressed a critical attitude towards dogma, Inger does something else that also adds to patterns in the stories of other informants: She modifies her statement.

*“But now I can look at Jesus as a good human being. I used to pray a bit, I think. It is easy to become too rigid, to do one thing, not another.”*

The modification she adds, one that points out positive aspects of what she has just criticized, is a manifestation of her expressed concern with not being rigid. I found this kind of modification in the stories of many of my informants, very often in connection with an emphasis on relativism, in the sense that what is right for me, is not necessarily right for another person.

### 9.3.2 Teacher, text and 'one's own experience'

As my other informants, Inger points out the importance of experience as an important source of authority, as opposed to relating to merely "*ideas in your head*", as she puts it.

*"At some point or another I believe that with experience, that you relate to experience and not just some idea in your head. You can fall into that trap all the time [relating to ideas instead of your experience]."*

Then Inger takes a turn that to me is surprising and unexpected:

*"That's when it is good to be led, a teacher. You really need it then. It is not done in a flash to find a teacher. So I am on the lookout now. I hope to find someone I trust. I guess I think that the person should have, it is a person that you trust, as a human being, too. You don't just get good answers. But it is a person who somehow sees you, I believe. You do put an extremely lot in the hands of the teacher. There is a connection; it is about reformulating the ideas you have about yourself. I hope that one will turn up. I believe so."*

To me it is surprising that an elaboration on the importance of your own experience can become a preamble to pointing out the need for a teacher. It is not the first time I observe what to me seemed to be a contradiction.

The way many of my informants talked, they kept weaving their reflections between references to the importance of "*your own experience*", "*the teacher*" as well as "*old scriptures*" (or "*the Buddha said*"). This way of talking, however, seemed more prominent in the conversations with people who had decided to practice within a certain Buddhist tradition, or as with Inger: contemplating the possibility of settling down within a certain tradition. I asked many of these informants: with the emphasis on ones own experience, where do the teachers and the texts come in? One of them answered:

*"I agree with you, this is a field of tension. Actually, all three should harmonize. To the degree they don't, it does not function well. If you find it in the old texts, that a teacher says something in his way, it is ok. But if he says something*

*totally different, well, then you have to wonder. But as long as they are in harmony, I feel I can trust both the teacher and the text, at least to a certain extent. Then my personal experience enters. If my experience says something totally different, there is a crisis. That is why I feel I cannot be a Muslim. The texts and teachers might agree, but it does not agree with my own experience and views. And I cannot just throw myself at just any new guru, you might get a guru who says things I like to hear, but it does not agree with the texts. Not that the texts should dominate... No, it is a complex relationship. But to the extent you feel that you speak the same language, then it is OK, then it is something you might proceed with.*

*The Pali texts speak a more modern language than the later Mahayana texts, because they address the human being directly. Not the way with 100 bodhisattvas and god knows how many gods in the heavens.... Or a strange Zen master who sits there and hits you. They talk about the mind, how consciousness works. And if a modern Theravada teacher tells me to sit this way, and think that way, and do that way, I think: OK, it agrees with me, as well as with the old texts. I like it that way. And I want to continue with that. You need to have a resonance in yourself. Otherwise you don't get interested. We are so selfish, if things don't resonate with yourself, you don't get interested... It is like reading a novel, if you cannot identify with the novel, it is simply not interesting. Our consciousness is made to take care of ourselves, simply. According to modern brain research! (laughs) I am reading a couple of books on brain research now, it is very interesting... It gives me some aha-experiences along the way."*

Another informant puts it this way:

*"It is useful to talk with others, to get some response. Check things out with the texts. It is the only possibility we have for control. If you isolate yourself, and engage in an ego trip, that is not good. It is only in relation to other people and a tradition it has to develop. It is a threefold we are talking about. It is important to have a balance. I, the teacher and the texts, there are three poles. If the texts dominate, I become a dry philologist who digs in grammar and knows a lot up here, but does not see it in relation to the real world. If the teacher dominates, you become a blind believer who does everything because the teacher says so. If the ego dominates, well, then it is just an ego trip. Of course, I touch upon all these poles from time to time, but it is about trying to achieve a balance, I believe."*

Yet another says:

*“I don’t know, it is a very interesting field of tension. And Tibetan Buddhism is particular about saying that not just the Buddha has had insight. Also other teachers in the tradition have had insights that are considered relevant. So you don’t have to go all the way back to Buddha; his disciples through many generations have insights that have been communicated to us. And I have to admit, I don’t know. I have also heard the fine principles that I teach myself, find out for myself, figure out what is right. And, “don’t listen to what your momma tells you...” See for yourself. I have sometimes done that, and ended up with a result that is not to be found in the book...”*

I asked her, what do you do then...?

*“Then I am being sent home with the message, meditate more! So that you can get to the right answer by yourself... (laughs heartily) That there is a right answer... and that the right answer is not always what I come up with. But that there is a right answer. So if you are not getting that answer, you have to meditate more...”*

In general, it seems like the triangle text, teacher and one’s own experience constitutes an unresolved field of tension, which necessitates an ongoing navigation on behalf of my informants. There are no given answers when it comes to how my informants relate to this field of tension. However, it is not until I talk to Inger, and later on Johan (whom I will return to) that these issues are addressed as urgent concerns. Inger as well as Johan is both in the process of making important decisions in their lives at the time I talk with them. Inger’s wish for a teacher is related to her insecurities regarding whether she should settle down and practice within a certain tradition.

*“I don’t quite know, should I keep on seeking, or should I stay here? It is pretty frustrating. I met a guy who went back and fourth between Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. But when you don’t quite know what, where to go, you get stressed out. It goes deep. There is always a reason why you don’t settle down. Where is the problem, this is not good enough and that is not good enough, then it is no point going on in that direction. Because then you just have to face that this is how it is always going to be, and rather be where you are, and work with that. You can do a little of everything, of course. A lot is at stake.*

In making her decision whether she should commit to a tradition or continue to seek, Inger unfolds a field of tension, between seemingly opposing ideas about the location of authority. And as my other informants, she tells me that *“a lot is at stake”*.

## 9.4 Johan

*“I am working on liquidation, not development. I have to work so that not every situation that pops up catches me, that situations don’t imprison me. Not just going along with the crowd, but thinking about things along the way.”*

I met Johan at KTLBS, he was one of the participants at a course we both attended at the town center. When we spoke he was in his early twenties. Our conversations take place in his flat, which he shares with a couple of other students.

### 9.4.1 Pragmatism and ‘finding one’s own truths’

Throughout our conversations, Johan emphasizes that Buddhism carries a potential for change that is important to him. He has already experienced that change is possible, and wants to keep moving in that direction:

*“I feel I have become more rational, I don’t know if it is the meditation or what. I used to become so sad and depressed. It sounds very right what Buddhism says, that everything is habits, because as life moves along you change, and you change in the directions that you have rehearsed, sort of. If you say you want to be more like this or that and follow it up and practice being that person, then you become that person.”*

Like my other informants, Johan talks about human beings as shapeable material. You can practice, and by working on it, you can become a certain kind of person. However, he points out a modifying factor by adding laughingly:

*“to a certain extent, at least...”*

Johan could be considered a freshman the time I first met him, as he had just began engaging himself in Buddhism. Characteristic of the way he talked are references to “they say” and “I have heard”. He points out that there are elements that he does not understand, but he concludes that “there is no point in thinking about enlightenment a lot. It just creates problems to worry about what it is.” The viewpoint he expresses is one of pragmatism: “if it works, then it is just to continue”.

*“I don’t really believe it, you hear stories about people who suddenly reach enlightenment, but I have read there are stages, that you become more and more enlightened. And that was a very important point to me when I began meditating.”*

*ACEM, for instance, they propagated that it was very good for students, for instance, because especially when you were having exams it was very good to meditate as you get peace in your body, and you get rested in half an hour. And it is, it is a period of relaxation, too. But at the same time it is work! You work with it!"*

Just like Martin, Johan points out meditation as work, not just relaxation. Johan switches between referring to stories he has heard, books he has read, and telling about his own experience. He emphasizes development as important, which he has in common with all my informants. He does not present himself as a believer, but points out that meditation is doing something good for him here and now. Whether there is any potential for enlightenment some time in the future is irrelevant, or at least very much secondary: *"if there is enlightenment, well, hey, that's great!"* If so, he considers it an extra bonus. What or whether he thinks about it now is irrelevant, he says.

When I ask him what kind of meditations he is practicing now, he answers:

*"I am almost not using any method now, I am sitting, and I am breathing, as long as I am aware that I am breathing; then I know that I am present. But sometimes I count. Sometimes I use mantras. But I have not been that used to Tibetan Buddhism, so I am not used to those different kinds of meditations. So I am actually just sitting there, breathing. I have read some books by Thich Nhat Hahn, where he says that when you meditate, when you breathe in, don't think that you are breathing in, but be aware of breathing in. That you breathe out. I believe that's what I do, or try to do. I have also tried some Tonglen. But I have not been able to do it regularly, because it is more work, you have to think so much. I think I need a thorough introduction to it, sometime! They say that it is good to dedicate what you do to people or things, so I try to imagine that I do this so that things will become better."*

Johan moves from telling me about the way he meditates to telling me about the importance of dedicating the merit of the meditation to other people, and that he imagines doing it so that *"things will become better"*. Johan keeps returning to the issue of other people suffering, as something he is compelled to relate to. When describing how he does visualizing during meditation, he says that

*"I try to relax and breathe and imagine someone who is hurting. For instance, I am very concerned about the 30,000 children dying every day from hunger; it is sort of a number that sticks... So I visualize them, and then I imagine that I take on all that suffering. And, they say that you loosen it up, that you have this kind of seal around your heart, I have heard someone say that, and if you take on all that*

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*suffering, it breaks the seal, and a white light flows around in your body and you are enlightened, and then you can give to those poor children. So I try to do that.”*

Johan pauses for a brief moment, and continues:

*“It sounds, I guess visualizing still sounds a bit mysterious, it sounds so strange. When you read about it, it sounds like magic, right, but it is actually just practical methods. Because there is so much that resembles magic, it sounds like sorcery. It still sounds like sorcery, even though I know what it is. It is sort of, you have to do it, become used to it. Thinking it is scary, because so many people say “dangerous sect, you must not become brainwashed” and stuff...”*

“They say that about Tashi Ling?”

*“About religion in general. People have the impression that religion is only crazy fanatics who try to convince you and earn money. But I am critical. I try to be critical. I have not found anything that sounds like that. It is usually just good stuff, good methods.”*

Johan refers to books he has read about Buddhism, he refers to teachers that he relates to. He refers to “*people in general*”, people who are not into Buddhism or religion, who express skepticism towards what he is engaging in. He is contemplating different, sometimes opposing claims, in his process of making choices. By doing so, he demonstrates very explicitly how making individual choices implies the use of criteria and values generated in a social context, but also how his choices and reflections are creative acts on his part.

Johan’s parents stopped being members of the State Church when they were in high school, he tells me. Johan himself is neither baptized nor confirmed, he had a humanist confirmation, but he says that was just nonsense he did to get presents. He does have relatives that he says were “*very much into tradition*”:

*“You were supposed to baptize your kids in church, but it did not seem like they thought about what it actually entailed. I think that’s a bit sad, that they do not ponder the content of it”.*

With his emphasis on reflection and pondering, Johan repeats a pattern to be found in the reflections of all my informants. They all pointed out the importance of finding your own truths, grounding your choices in your own experience, not just doing something because someone else does, or tells you to.

### 9.4.2 Inside, outside and relativism

The first time I talked with Johan, he told me that he did not think about himself as religious. I laughed, and pointed at a very elaborate altar he has made in his room. Johan laughs as well, and says:

*“Yes, I have been wondering why I have that...”*

Then he continues:

*“It is for decoration! There is a TV in the living room, one could ask whether it is religion to sit and stare at that... No, the altar is to become more conscious, sort of. I have read about it, and I have experienced it myself, too, that if you make an effort with stuff, it is easier to, it is like, what you do, steers what you think. I have thought about it this way, that I want a little thing that reminds me of, lighting some candles to, I am not quite sure what I am thinking, but some times I think about it as a sacrifice to someone. But mainly it is the awareness about things, that you are aware of things. At least that’s my impression in Buddhism, that you have those different things to remind yourself of the ideas, like Buddhist ideas, for instance.”*

What looks like an altar is a collection of things like candles, Buddha-statues and incense, nicely arranged on a table with a tablecloth on. Johan expresses an understanding of what he surrounds himself with, as something that will have an influence on his mind, it will “steer your thinking”. By arranging this altar, Johan is actually working on his own mind, he tells me.

*“So, no, I don’t think of myself as religious. Because I don’t believe anything, I don’t quite know, if you are religious, you are supposed to believe in a God, aren’t you?” I am not quite certain of what religion is! They argue about it, is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy. The Dalai Lama says that it is the science of the mind. And I would say that that’s what it is. It is practical methods to break your habitual patterns.”*

Like all my informants, Johan emphasizes the pragmatic aspect of his quest: practical methods to break your habitual patterns.

However, he also points out that there are other aspects to Buddhism as well that he does not relate to in the same way:

*Every time I read about Tibetan Buddhism, where it is more traditional stuff, when they talk about like six different worlds, then I feel like... oh... (he groans). I have not quite understood it.”*



From telling about his initial reaction to ideas about different worlds as presented in “*traditional Tibetan Buddhism*”, he starts juxtapositioning different claims he has heard, in an elaborate reflection:

*“Some say that it is merely about levels of consciousness in your head, one moment you are in the animal kingdom, where you react on instinct, the other moment you are someplace else. Kalo Rinpoche was asked about it this summer. He said, why not? There are worlds; you know there is an animal world and a human world, so why not believe in the other worlds as well? So I don’t know. When I think about it that way, I think that it is a bit religion. In Christianity the most important thing is to believe. And if you are a believer, then you are religious. You have to believe in Buddhism, too, before you can say that... So, no, I don’t know. In general I don’t look at myself as religious. I experience people who are religious as very... I have met people on the street, some kind of Christian sect or something, “can I talk to you”, and asked me if I believed in God and if Jesus has lived, and yes, I believe that Jesus has lived as a historical person, and that he was probably very kind, maybe he was a Buddha. But I would also like to distance myself from atheism. I think of myself as an agnostic, I don’t believe it until I have seen it! It may be stupid not to actively exploring things, just waiting until it is served on a silver platter. Maybe I am a mixture between an agnostic and a religious person!”*

Johan laughs. Earlier in this text I pointed out the porosity of the environments I encountered when I first came to KTL, the twilight zones, the shades of gray, with no direct correlate to the distinctions of saved/not saved, good/evil that I was used to from different Christian contexts. Johan’s reflections illustrate my point.

Gray zones as opposed to black and white are also conjured up when he elaborates upon alternative medicine. He tells me that his mother made him start attending a course at ACEM, she used to be a teacher, but “*she became very alternative*”, and got an education as a Rosen-therapist instead.

*“I believe that medical science in the West is very, above everyone else, that’s how they think of themselves. Doctors believe they know everything, they are sort of authoritative persons, “I have read this in the book” and that’s it. I don’t think that’s the way things are. I think that there is a lot between heaven and earth we don’t know anything about. I think that there is a lot of alternative medicine that is very right. When it comes to alternative medicine, acupuncture works for some things, and is has also to do with the person it is performed on, how they receive it. The placebo effect is*

*important. The body is healing itself. You need people who are doctors or alternative practitioners; they help the body to heal itself. But I don't have much regard for all the use of medication in Western medicine. That you just take pill and that is supposed to be the answer to everything. But I am a bit like this, that I don't believe that one thing is totally right, that one alternative method is the answer to everything. Neither have I managed to make up my mind about... I have heard a few Buddhists say that you have to make a choice regarding which path to go, otherwise it is just spiritual shopping, and it will just dissolve. You will disappear in it all. It is important to follow a path.*

Johan consistently emphasizes his attitude as being critical and open. He is also telling me about approaching a dilemma very similar to the one Inger tells me about. She, too, has been told that one has to choose a path to follow, and she does not know what to do. Johan as well as Inger reports struggling with a field of tension, between the importance that is put on finding your own truths, and the importance of dedicating yourself to a specific Buddhist tradition. These are issues that emerge as very specific, recurring themes in their stories.

Johan points out that

*"I don't think that Buddhism is the only right thing. In Islam they also have this mystical tradition, I have it in the book here, which is totally like Buddhism. It is Sufism, where they talk about the same, just with other words. It is also working with an attitude towards life that is permeated with something positive. It is hard to put in words, but it very quickly becomes expressions you have heard so many times that they become clichés."*

When saying this, he also points out something he senses as a paradox:

*"You never hear any Buddhist teacher say anything that degrades other religions at all, but they still have a little of that idea that they are right. I believe that Buddhism does not think they are right, you are not right until you are enlightened, we are all in the same mess, regardless of what that mess is. A Sufist may become just as enlightened with the right attitude. While in other religions, you have to be a Christian, they have to say that they are Christians to get to Heaven. But in Buddhism you don't have to say that you are a Buddhist, if you only have the right view."*

Maybe not even say you are a Buddhist, I say.

*"Yes. But when you talk about it that way, it still sounds like I am degrading other religions."*

Johan pauses briefly, then he makes a tentative conclusion:

*“So actually one should not say anything at all. Maybe that’s why the teachers, what they do is not to say anything, because there is nothing to argue about.*

I say: Regardless of tolerance, there is a paradox about choosing, you try to choose the right thing, and implicitly – some things are better than other things... Johan says:

*“The only sensible thing is to have a healthy attitude towards life, and forget the rest. Like trying to pigeonhole, being 100% certain before you can do that, in a way. You have to try something that sounds reasonable, and then you don’t have to say that you are a Buddhist or anything, but just see if it helps you. That’s what I think about those Bardos, to see if it is smart, it does not hurt.*

He pauses for a brief moment, and then he adds:

*“But if you ask a Christian he would say that it does hurt you...”*

And Johan leaves it at that, with a big smile.

### 9.4.3 Creative twists and transformation

I ask Johan about Karma. What are his thoughts in this regard? He answers:

*“I think that if I knock on the table it changes world history!!”*

Johan laughs.

*“No, but everything you do has an effect, every thing you do leads to something else. And if someone does something today, history is changed for ever, because things happen in a different way after that. That’s the first thing I think about when it comes to Karma. That’s logical, I think. Everything has a cause, from the past. And I also think it is interesting to think about rebirth, they say that the most important argument for rebirth is that things cannot just arise from nothing. It seems very logical. So maybe there is a consciousness coming from somewhere. I am disposed to believe that, even though I used to find it very strange. But there was so much that I found to be strange. Being a vegan, for instance, I could not understand how people could survive. But now it is the most ordinary thing in the world.”*

“They say...” followed by “it seems very logical”, to “I am disposed to believe that”. In the next moment Johan draws upon his own experience: Being a vegan is something he also used to think was strange. Now he finds it “just ordinary”. It implies that one day he might find the idea of consciousness as “coming from somewhere” just as ordinary, he says. Johan has experienced how new ideas may seem strange, and that this strangeness disappears as the ideas become more familiar. His conclusion is that it is not the ideas themselves that are strange or ordinary, it is the perspective he applies that infuse ideas with strangeness or

familiarity. By reasoning this way, he opens up for the possibility of other people's claims as being right, even though he find the claims strange. He does so, based upon reference to his own experience. What he does here strikes me as genius:

He manages to combine seemingly opposing claims and values, by introducing different levels of experience. He has experienced several times that what appears strange may become ordinary, as he gets used to the idea. Based upon this experience, he reasons that his immediate experience of strangeness should not make him disregard whatever claim he finds strange. In fact, based upon his own experience at one level, he opens up for disregarding his own experience at another level, opening up for trying out what other authorities – text or teachers – may claim. Instead of appearing as opposing and contradictory elements (whether the ultimate authority resides in the teacher, the text or your own experience), Johan reintroduces them in an argument where these elements rather lend one another support. The importance put on relying on your own experience, is made into an argument for relying on the teacher.

Johan continues:

*“I read about a lot of things, and then I think about it. But the most important thing is not to make up an opinion about everything right away. You have to take it step by step, do the practical things in everyday life first, instead of philosophising so much. I heard, someone said to me that the lamas say that it is not good pondering the meaning of life. Maybe it is best not to think too much, to take things as they come, read, philosophise. Not pulling your hair out because you cannot find the meaning of life here and now. I used to do that. I became so depressed, when thinking that it was important to figure out the meaning of life. Meaningless!”*

Based upon his own experience of getting depressed by pondering the meaning of life, Johan is ready to accept the claims of lamas who say that it is not good pondering the meaning of life, because speculation on such issues is futile. Releasing himself from the perceived obligation of pondering such issues, brings about what he senses as becoming released of a burden.

*“There is another thing about Buddhism, that it is not a goal that everyone should become Buddhists. That everybody should become enlightened. Because that will never happen. And your best friend is your greatest enemy. It would be sad if there was no resistance in the world, because that way you'd never have anything to learn from. So, maybe it is good that not everything is good. It is more your attitude*

*towards things that has to change, not the things in themselves. Everything does not have to be perfect to make life good. Or maybe everything does become perfect if you do something with your head. Even though there are 30,000 children dying from hunger every day, it is an amazing world. People are pissed at God, because he has created the world with all its faults. And it is just silly to think that way. I don't know, it does not seem so good to condemn the world because it is the way it is. You should rather do something about it”.*

Johan says that all the mess we encounter in life can be seen as opportunities for development. This is a theme that the attentive reader will recognize by now, without me pointing out how Johan thus is part of a much larger pattern.

#### **9.4.4 Freedom and unveiling the mysterious**

In a conversation a year later, Johan elaborates on the issue of whether Buddhism is philosophy, psychology or religion again. This time his elaborations differ slightly from the first time we talked. And yet we find many of the same elements:

*“When I started with Buddhism, it was more an interesting philosophy. Then it became psychology, it helped me in everyday life, but as time moved along, I started thinking about it more as religion, too. Even though you have not grown up with it, like Bardo sounds strange, but when you study it and see what they are actually saying, taking away the mysterious words that you don't understand because you have not heard them before, then it is in a way just a practical attitude towards life, that makes you constantly focus upon what is important. I am still critical towards things, at least I hope...”*

As “mysterious words” become “unveiled”, they reappear to Johan as “just a practical attitude towards life”. Elements that he used to associate with the religion, which in our first interview made him say “then I feel like... oh...” and groan, are now elements he thinks make sense. He explains:

*“If you are only critical and never take anything to you, you never get anything out of it. So I try out stuff with the attitude that it may be a method that works. Such an attitude towards life makes me do what I want to do. Bardo can be a way of working with your attitude towards life. If you imagine that there are Bardos... that you do things... that death as you look at it... - the way I grew up with it, death was just black. But life and death are not that very different, it is just a practical thing with the body. You don't have the body you can sense with. But you are the mind*

*which is a large part of what moves on. But what you have in your head after that is six times stronger, you feel the tendencies you have much stronger. There is continuity in what you do, which I think meditation helps you see. When something happens now, I think a bit more about it; what is the best reaction here? I think that is one of the most important things, developing patterns of reaction that are healthier. A Bardo-attitude towards life helps you to do that. Then you have this building-plan, some basic theory, you don't have to swallow everything, you don't have to take the whole package or anything."*

Ideas have to be tried out before you can dismiss them, Johan tells me. He talks about having "a building plan", as opposed to "swallowing the whole package".

In this conversation as well, Johan returns to the claim he encounters, regarding the necessity of making a choice, committing to a certain Buddhist tradition:

*"Some people say that if you are to follow a path, you have to do it properly. But I am not talking about swallowing everything you hear and not being critical, or total devotion. But one can maybe experiment a bit, try the Bardo attitude, you can see if it works. Even though it sounds oriental, it does not have to be dangerous!"*

Following a tradition wholly and fully is not something Johan sees as opposed to being critical. On the contrary, only by doing so can you develop a basis upon which you can exercise your critical attitude, you have to see if it works first, he says.

*"It is to get the experience you have to try it, and you need someone who teaches you, and texts that explain it. You can also get there by yourself on your own, through your own experience, but that takes much more time. Buddha lived an enormous amount of lives... He worked himself through an enormous amount of lives. Finally he became enlightened. If you just do it on your own, it takes such a terrible long time... If that's the way it is, of course! Then it is wise to listen. But if you swallow stuff without evaluating it, then you don't have the right understandings of it."*

In one of our last conversations, Johan reflects on the choices he is facing in life. He is contemplating becoming a Buddhist monk.

*"If I let go of all my preconceptions of how life should be, it needn't be scary."*

He talks about the studies he is engaging in presently, and points out that it may be a wise thing to finish his education, even if he does decide to become a monk. He tells me about the

school in Katmandu, which he has gathered a lot of information about. These matter of fact issues intertwine with reflections on how he relates to them:

*“I don’t think that it is that important to have security nets everywhere anymore. Like “a bank account just in case”... and “you need a goal and direction with your education”. These are security nets. You are afraid that you might not make it in the future. In Buddhist traditions they have these crazy wisdom people who cut off all attachments to life. The security nets can prevent you from taking the steps that are good.*

A life revolving around “just in case”, always making certain you have some kind of “back-up”, is a life that Johan portrays as imposing disabling limits to his life. He wants to liquidate this kind of “attachment to life”.

*“You can lead the same life. But things are not so important to you that you get psychologically ill if they disappear. You are not a prisoner of life anymore.”*

That is freedom, Johan says. Not being a prisoner of life.

## 9.5 Hans

### 9.5.1 Tools for transformation

*“I have had the need for a system or technology to change the course of my life. So that is important. That’s why I have put so much work and time into it. It is a bit like this; what I am seeking primarily is a system I can use, a technology. Today I might as well have become a Christian, it does not matter. [ ] I have the attitude that it does not matter that much what you do, it is all just different variations of the same thing. Actually. What it is about, is that you are not afraid anymore”*

Hans is twenty eight, he is baptized and confirmed. However, his confirmation was just about formalities, he never cared about God, he says.

*“I have always been skeptical towards religion”.*

But four years ago he became very interested in

*“how things are interconnected, how come a human being is at a certain place mentally, what happens, communication. So I had a go at different explanations. I have never thought highly of psychology, so I have tried to find an alternative to that, sort of.”*

Later in our conversation he returns to his skeptical attitude towards psychology, and he says

*“I don’t believe in psychology, neither therapy based on communication nor drugs. It has never been able to solve anything for me, anyway.”*

Hans keeps his head shaved; he has tattoos and a big, black dog. He tells me about radical political engagement as a teenager, an engagement he still has, in the sense that he cares about ecological issues. But he says that he is no longer as active and radical as he used to be. He tells me that:

*“When I was so very, very, very radical, it was an expression of my anger, that I was angry.”*

Hans displays an enormous knowledge of different types of Buddhism, the amount of information he has acquired is impressive. He must have spent a lot of time and energy learning, and I sense that something must have constituted strong, motivating factors for such dedication. In the beginning of our conversation he tells me a lot about different religions, traditions and their history. He has read a lot, books as well as on the internet, and he says that

*“By reading such books I have come closer to the core of Buddhism”.*

Like my other informants, Hans reveals an understanding of Buddhism as having a core, and that this core can be found in any religion. However, having said that he modifies his statement a bit:

*“Of course, there are religions and views of life that are not constructive, that are destructive, like occultism and witchcraft and stuff. It does not pull in the right direction. Magic and stuff. I have met people with a lot of strange, spiritual interests. Wicca, Hare Krishna, the TM-movement – the usual. And I have a friend who is into Sai Baba. He is one of the most important gurus in India today. He has an Ashram in South India. A lot of Westerners go there. There is a lot of strange stuff here in this city. Shamans and witches. Some of the people with the highest degree within Western Occultism live here. For people who use it as a path to spiritual emancipation it works. But a lot of people just want to be a witch, wear black clothes and cultivate their own disturbed personalities... That’s the way it is in Wicca. There are a lot of people there who are just whacky; they are not well in the head. That is pulling in a negative direction. If you want to grow spiritually, you acquire some responsibility along the way, you have to contribute positively in this world. At least a little, I think. There are people, who instead of growing spiritually, they manipulate people. But that’s magic. Magic is about diverting people’s attention, so that they no longer understand what is happening. Reality gets twisted. A magician twists*



*people's realities. That's not good. Everything is just an illusion, right. TV is magic in that way, too. When you meditate, you sort of do the opposite. You practice seeking the very concrete, to achieve as clear an understanding as possible of things as they are."*

Later on in our conversation, Hans moves from telling me about religion in general, to elaborating more on his personal experience. He tells me about a difficult childhood, something he has in common with a friend of his, who also engages in seeking.

*"And you could say that we have had life-situations through our upbringing, where we experienced a lot of suffering. The fact that we are seeking today, has to do with that."*

Hans weaves his elaborations on suffering directly with his fascination with the concept of Bardo. He finds the concept relevant in relation to the issues he reports struggling with:

*"Sometimes I think that the concept in itself is a liberation; the idea that things dissolve. I felt that Tibetan Buddhism was a bit me, sort of."*

"A bit me": Hans uses an expression I have heard from many of my other informants. Hans tells me that the idea of Bardo is something that allows him to understand even hardship as meaningful, as posing an opportunity, not just disaster. And he likes being reminded of the fact that everything eventually dissolves and passes, he says. Just like my other informants, Hans embraces elements that he can make use of in his specific situation in life. Just like my other informants, Hans reports that there is much at stake in his project of seeking.

Meditation is something Hans emphasizes as not just being about sitting in the lotus position for a limited amount of time. The meditational state of mind is something he cultivates when engaging in his life in general, he tells me. For instance, he works with dogs. He draws parallels between what he sees as the core of Buddhism; being open, being present, and the training of dogs.

*"Dogs teach you a lot about your mental habits when you train. So I will claim that what happens when you train dogs is meditation. It is very direct. You don't have the time to reflect, you just have to act, in whatever speed that the dog demands. It has many elements of meditation, I think."*

Later in our conversation, Hans says:

*"A week ago I started lifting weights; I have not done that for ages. I am trying to work a bit more with meditation together with weight-lifting. That's pretty*

*exciting. It does not feel like I am using muscle at all, I just try to be present in what I do.”*

Walking the dog, lifting weights, it can all be meditation, he tells me.

Hans has tried out a lot of different practices and philosophies, that he sees as providing him with much better tools for living than psychology can, he says. Among the alternatives Hans finds appealing, is Rastafarianism. He considers it “*a good religion*”, because it is about “*rising up on a human level*” and about “*realizing yourself*”. He points out the elements pertaining to transformation and development as particularly appealing. He also perceives Rastafarianism to be very pragmatic, which he points out as important and good:

*“It is not an exact system; it is a lot about feelings. Eating food that feels good. Being happy, and things like that.”*

I ask him; and if you are not happy?

*“Then you have to do things to make yourself happy. Spend time in nature, dance. It is a lot of good morality. I don’t like morality much actually; it can easily become quite square and not be rooted in reality. But, there is a lot of good morality in Rastafarianism. That’s how you are supposed to relate to others, it is explained a lot better there than in Christianity, Judaism and Islam.”*

What Hans considers to be relevant alternatives to choose between, has to relate to the life he is living, he says. A recurring theme is his need for “*mechanisms*” he can use “*to move on*”.

### **9.5.2 Inside outside**

While reflecting, Hans mentions archetypes as important. I ask him what he means by that, and he answers:

*“I believe that it is so simple that when you are sorry, you get in touch with the minds of the people who are sorry. When you are happy, you get in touch with the minds of the people who are happy. In a way. It is like in Hinduism, there are a lot of archetypes for different things. Or streams of consciousness for different things you could get in touch with. Depending on what you want to. I do believe, I believe, that if people think and worship gods, then those gods or patterns or those qualities will exist. In what way you are being influenced by them, it will depend on your own will and motivation. And your mental training, I believe.”*

Hans talks about “*gods or patterns or qualities*” that will exist if they are worshipped by people, and that there are “*streams of consciousness*” that you can get in touch with, if you let

them. The way he talks about these phenomena, it is as if he erases the borderlines between inside and outside; he tells me that certain qualities will exist if you worship them. Through his elaborations, he conjures up a reality of tightly woven interconnection, a reality of which he is very much a part.

The reality he talks about is also a reality in which human beings can acquire the qualities of others by proximity:

*“I believe in spending time with people who are a bit enlightened. I think that is important to find a bit of the enlightened traces in yourself. To get there yourself. I go to a chiropractor who teaches TM. There are little things that he says, it is some of the most pedagogical thing I have ever encountered. His ideas, depictions of meditation, it goes just straight into me. Much much better than what I have read in books. He is very down to earth, and very thorough. I feel confidence in people who are thorough and decent. At the same time he is funny. You know, I trust him.”*

Hans continues:

*“When you asked me why I became interested in such things, one of the reasons is that I see that one can influence such things in yourself, by worshipping different qualities or Gods or whatever you want to. Like a girl who lives here, she had the need to become meaner. So she hung up a lot of pictures of Latin American bitchy pin-ups on her room for a while... To get some of it in her. Yes... She does not need it anymore, she has found peace. The subconsciousness is just a reflex, what you fill it up with, is what comes out. It has no imagination. So, it is actually just about choosing what you want, in a way.”*

Hanging up pictures on the wall of bitchy pin-ups can be a means of infusing yourself with these qualities, he says. In a sense he portrays human beings in general as having no control, as we are part of a certain context: what comes in is what goes out. But he also points out the very same phenomenon as something that provides potential for control: these contexts, these surroundings can be changed by us. We can hang certain pictures on the wall, and we can choose to spend time with people having enlightened qualities, he says. By making such moves in our surroundings, we can change our mental qualities, he explains.

### **9.5.3 The body, movement and transformation**

Hans has learnt a lot, and he wants to learn more:

*“I want to learn more about meditation to move on, sort of. To have more frameworks around it. I try tentatively and alone, in this project of mine. So, that’s what I am trying to work with. I have decided to practice some kind of Martial Art, it is more spiritual. Kyodo or Tai Chi. To get people who are a bit into that around me. Simply. I did a little judo when I was little, and a bit kyodo. But that’s some years ago. There has not been any continuity. Kyodo is so difficult that you should meditate to be able to do it standing, bow and arrow and hit a target. It is Japanese bowshooting with a long bow. I might end up landing on jaido, it is an art where you can practice without a partner. That’s the good thing about it. For the time being I work mainly with meditation, yoga, exercise, and I run a bit. Doing Martial Arts is something I have wanted to do for a long time, actually. Getting meditation into movement, to me it is almost simpler when I get to move a bit. A lot of things become much clearer when I move. I danced a lot before, I think that’s why.”*

What kind of dance? I ask.

*“I am an old raver, you see! (laughs) When I was young and wild... That’s a lot of meditation, actually. When I was young, we danced techno; you barely touched the floor with your toes. Today they just stand there and jump, I don’t understand it...”*

Hans laughs. Oh, the kids today... I say, jokingly.

Raving is something that Hans explains as being of spiritual importance:

*“That’s where I have had one of my big, clear moments, where I felt in touch with gods and gurus and demons, actually.”*

As he has been mentioning the use of drugs in association with raving, I ask him if he had his big, clear moments in relation to the dancing or the drugs or both. Hans answers:

*“I think that drugs may open up things for people, it seems like that, it removes anxiety, and that will open up for other stuff. But you also have drugs that work as a catalyst for anxiety. So that you have to relax, or dance like this and that, and then you will experience stuff anyway. But it is not like magic mushrooms or LSD. That disturbs your senses. It does not make you get in touch with anything that is not already there. But there is a lot of energy, when there are a lot of people dancing techno, it is a great atmosphere. It is a bit like, maybe I am a bit interested in ritual action and stuff like that. Trying to understand it. Techno culture as it used to be has been compared to shamanism. And it is a bit like that.”*

The oneness that Hans emphasizes resonates in the stories of my other informants. His emphasis on the body is also prototype. Yet his stories bear their own distinctiveness, his ways of elaborating, the experience he tells me about and the choices that he makes follow its own specific trail, which could never be confused with that of any of my other informants.

## 9.6 Elisabeth

### 9.6.1 Making the world a holy place

*“I think that it is possible to make this world, Samsara, into a holy place. That is my life project. That I want the holy within the profane. That there are not two separate worlds.”*

Elisabeth is a woman my age who has grown up in a “*totally atheistic family*”, as she puts it. We spent some time together at a summer course at KSL where we first met. She was very specific about pointing out that she is not a Buddhist. When I recently contacted her to let her read a draft of my thesis to get her feedback, she can tell me she has not been attending any Buddhist activities at all since we last met. The conversation that I will be presenting parts of here, took place in her apartment. I asked her, how did you end up at the summer course? Elisabeth answers:

*“I found information on the internet about the summer-courses, and I was very interested in attending the course about Bardo. Periods of transition. I felt I was in a period of transition.”*

Elisabeth came to the summer course, because the thematic addressed was on her own agenda, she tells me. She explains that she did not come there to encounter something she found alien or exotic, on the contrary, she came there because the title of the summer course “*spoke to her*” and her situation in life.

I ask Elisabeth, why Buddhism? What is the attraction? Elisabeth answers:

*“They have a concept of energy; they believe that the world is an illusion, that in a way you create, produce energy, and then you get energy back. You don’t find this concept of energy in Christianity. The way I feel it, I sense energy from stones, from human beings, the energy of people, what vibrations they are on. You don’t have that in Christianity. You are supposed to be nice and a good person, sort of. But I feel*

*that there is more a science about energies in Buddhism. Within Tantra there is a lot of talk about energies, when there is talk about Chakras, which is about energy. They have a totally different energy system. There are energy conduits all over the body. This is something that I have sensed from I was very little, I have always sensed that reality. But, “the world is not like that”, you know, right.... But here they have a science about precisely that. You can cultivate it; meditation is about training yourself and your body to become more conscious. They have knowledge about what I experience as the world.”*

Elisabeth tells me that she has sensed certain aspects of reality from early childhood, aspects that people in her surroundings denied. They had other ideas of how the world was constituted, she says. Elisabeth had an experience of life that did not fit with the world-views that her surroundings presented her with, she tells me. This is why she embraced Buddhism, as it elaborated on, and made sense of, her experience. She found “*knowledge about what I experience as the world*”, as she puts it. Later in our conversation she says:

*“I probably do everything wrong and stuff, but I feel that I can really use those things, and what I have read. I am sort of not alone in this world!”*

Elisabeth finds that Buddhism provides concepts that embrace the reality she experiences. She is no longer isolated with experience that is denied by others, but her experience is being acknowledged.

*“The last year I have developed warmth in my hands. My sister has a lot of pain in her body, and she totally, she feels the difference. People say that I take away headaches and stuff. It has to do with, through meditation I become more and more in touch with myself, with certain powers. But I don’t attribute it to any concept of God. I cannot define it. [ ] It was purely instinctual. I could sense that people were hurting, what they felt. And I reacted instinctively. I feel that there is so much that happens at different levels, many many different dimensions... A person almost needs a broadband connection to receive it all!”*

Elisabeth laughs, and continues:

*”Quite a while ago I attended a shaman-course. But that was kind of wrong. I did not feel at home there. It sort of became fake. But it led me to Finnmark where I studied shamanism. If there was anything left of it, up there, that way of thinking. The energies in shamanism are more primitive than in Buddhism. The energies are more refined, transformed, in Buddhism. The basic energy, the powers, right. In Buddhism they have refined it, transformed it, pulled it up to another level... That is*

*why I thought it was so funny that on the birthday of the Dalai Lama, they had a smoke sacrifice. I thought, this must be clearly inspired by shamanism. Tibet is a mountain country, it has to be the same. You have the lamas who have been shamans their own way...*

Elisabeth tells me more about her spiritual CV:

*"I went to Finnmark and stayed for a year. I traveled around and interviewed people; I looked at the old places of sacrifice and stuff. I asked people if they still believed in it, and they said that they "might as well... you don't know how things will go if you don't", that is what they said. There is more talk about the practice of shamanism today. People seek something beyond the superficial reality. The church that we have, there must be something about it that make people feel that they are not included. Maybe people feel that it is not a holy place, for some reason. People want to light candles, they want rituals, that is what it seems like. Catholic elements, sort of."*

When Elisabeth attended the summer course, she had been put in a cabin together with a self-proclaimed shaman, who also attended the summer course:

*"Of all places and cabins I could have been put, I ended up in the same cabin as the shaman..."*

Elisabeth points out continuity: She went to a shaman-course. This led her to Finnmark. She was interested in, and studied shamanism. Then she was put in the same cabin as a shaman at the summer course. She presents the events in her life and her choices as anything but random.

### **9.6.2 Fusing realms and animated realities**

Elisabeth has told me she considers herself a mystic. So I ask her, what do you mean by that? She answers:

*"I have read a lot about it. Trying to see something beyond this reality, to see something. To become one with it. I have had mystical experiences. And I have experienced that as truth. You get sucked into something, you become something different. I have experienced that twice. The first time in the crypt in Nidarosdomen. It just came over me. It was as if something was beaming up from the crypt, some kind of energy. And I just, swish, I disappeared. I am not certain how long it lasted."*

Elisabeth laughs heartily. Martin spoke of being sucked into an icon. Elisabeth felt sucked into the crypt. Rannveig felt drawn to. The realities that are being portrayed are animated realities, in which there are powers beyond the powers of the people inhabiting it. Icons and crypts can suck people in, places can exert a pull. Events and things can organize themselves and unfold the paths that are to be walked.

*“And then I went to a Falconer course. And I experienced that I became one with the falcon. It was really weird. Before I went to England I had a dream about falcons, I had to see falcons. And then I did. It was a dream that I just had to follow up...”*

Elisabeth tells me of dreams and waking reality, she portrays different realms of being as fusing.

*“And then I went to Greece. It is just amazing, it is like traveling in mythology, here is Poseidon, and here this and that happened, right, mythological stuff. And it was this temple of Poseidon. There was a fence, to prevent people from touching it. But I found out that I just had to touch it, so I jumped off the bus, and when it was dark I trespassed. I passed the wired fence. It was terrible. It was probably because I was afraid of being discovered, but I tried to go inside and take in what that god represented. Poseidon was cruel. Terrifying. Powers of chaos. It was just terrible, like bloody hell. But I felt pretty tough afterwards! Later on I went to the temple of Hera, and that was a totally different energy. A calm, dark magnetism. At the place of Hera, I felt I was charged afterwards. I went back to the car, and went to a bar. A Greek guy came and took my hand, and he just jumped and pulled it back – what in the world is this? It was as if he had been given an electric shock, he said. I had been totally energized. Afterwards he just hung around me, he did not want to have sex; we just walked on the beach and talked. I had been totally energized.*

The aspect of animation seems more prominent in Elisabeth’s stories, compared to the stories of my other informants. She tells about becoming so charged by certain locations that she literally produces electricity that other people report sensing. And continues:

*When I am telling this stuff, it is kind of, one cannot walk around in the world telling people things like this, you know!”*

I think I understand what she means. When I read this text, I am concerned, too, that potential readers might get the wrong impression of Elisabeth. I try to imagine what I might have thought if I had only read her story. But I have met Elisabeth, and it puts what she tells me in a different perspective. I know her as what I would define as an intelligent, reflective and highly resourceful woman. She has a good education, with exams from the University, and



she has also been granted scholarships of different kinds. The job she holds today is one in which only a well-functioning and rational person would have been able to handle, and she seems to be well liked by other people. What she is telling me does not seem opposed to being rational and sane. The fact that she, as well as I, fear that some might get a “*wrong impression*”, tells a story in itself. It tells a story about us being aware of a social reality where there are certain ideas about what is normal and what is not.

*“One of the reasons that I have been drawn to Buddhism, is the Dalai Lama and the ethics, the Buddhist ethic, the enormous tolerance. Nobody can measure up to him. Everybody can feel that his vibrations are good, they are strong. I was so happy when I got to see him, it was just an amazing amount of happiness when I saw him, there is clearly something. That he represents.”*

At the summer course Elisabeth had told me about a dream she had had about the Dalai Lama, so the subject of him representing something special is not new. I ask her about the dream again. Elisabeth exclaims:

*“You have an amazing memory!”*

We laugh.

*“Yes, indeed, I did. I did have a dream, where I started to cry in his arms. He met me emotionally. It was very strange.”*

Buddhist ontology was something that Elisabeth felt captured her experience of reality in a way that she had not sensed before, she tells me. In the dream she tells me about, she is literally being embraced, by the Dalai Lama. And the sensations that accompany this event are so strong that she just leans towards his chest and cries and cries. In a sense, this dream can be understood as an essence of everything she has told me. She is being embraced. An embrace that seems to represent acceptance, acceptance of her reality, of her way of experiencing life. An embrace that lets her in, that makes her part of something: *“I am not alone anymore”*.

## 10. Reflections

### 10.1 *Analysis, the creation of artifacts and aspects of dismissal*

#### 10.1.1 The making of “hotchpotch”

From the conversations I have presented I have pointed out diversity as well as discerned common denominators. In this sense my data-material confirms what much of existing literature describes as characteristic of New Age. My data-material also lends support to the warning Sutcliffe makes, against assuming New Age as a “more-or-less singular and homogeneous entity” (Sutcliffe 2003:3). The concept of New Age does seem to reify what is rather a complexity of intertwining, even colliding discourses and ongoing processes. True, there has been a change regarding how New Age is understood in the history of religion, the concept itself has been pointed out as a construction, and new paradigms are being sought out (Frisk 2005). However, even if our intentions are to deconstruct the concept, the concept ‘New Age’ in itself can be understood as a trap, very hard to get away from the moment it is introduced, setting and narrowing down the stage for what debates that can follow. The concept of New Age introduces distinctions where there are none, while glossing over distinctions that should be noted and followed up. The concept itself leaves a lingering trace, even if we dedicate the text to the task of deconstructing it. It is an example of the Wittgensteinian negation: the negation still contains the claim of what is being negated, even if a “not” is added (Wittgenstein 1993:136).

Not only does the concept ‘New Age’ work in a reifying manner. But I see a troublesome otherness arising, infused with certain characteristics that have no correlate in my data-material. Heelas says that New Age is eclectic hotchpotch of beliefs, practices and ways of life (Heelas 1999). By doing so, he points out the plurality that I also observed in my data material. But he does something else as well: An expression like a “hotchpotch of beliefs” conjures up an image of a big pot, wherein a lot of different elements are being randomly stirred together<sup>53</sup>. The shopping-metaphor I earlier pointed out as recurring in much academic

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<sup>53</sup> I am not saying anything about the attitude of Heelas. On the contrary, Heelas even maintains that “the New Age is worthy of study in that it claims to be offering wisdom. Anything which makes this claim, especially when wisdom pertains to alternatives to the clearly imperfect world in which we live, deserves serious consideration” (1999:5). By pointing out that there may be something to be learnt, Heelas is certainly not dismissing New Age (whatever New Age might be). But an expression like “hotchpotch” carries connotations of its own, connotations that I do not recognize in the

literature about New Age, adds to the sense of something not only random, but also a bit superficial. My data-material does not support any depiction of the random or the superficial, quite the contrary. The beliefs and practices of my informants are not randomly stirred. The stirring and blending is rather an act performed by the researcher, who lumps together a multitude of observations. When looking at the stories of each individual as I have done in the previous chapters, I see no random mixture. Each person I spoke to elaborated upon a careful selection of elements in a logical, coherent manner. This is so, because the elements are extracted and annotated due to *something being at stake* for the person in question. My informants report grappling with existential questions. Through their stories hard work and struggle is conjured up. Concepts like “hotchpotch” and “shopping” carry connotations that point us in the wrong direction. Not only do they make us miss out on what is at stake for the individuals in question. But they make us miss out on the fact that there is something at stake in the first place.

The investigative procedure has the propensity of producing artifacts that may miss out on important aspects of the phenomena we are trying to understand. By artifacts I mean how we render other people, their beliefs, practices, their ways of life, their experience and life-stories. There is no way of proceeding when doing research that can grasp every aspect of social reality. My concern does not lie herein. My concern is rather with what I have observed as a pattern, one that re-presents people’s concerns with existential issues as something superficial, infusing fellow human beings and their life-stories with characteristics that make them easy to dismiss. It is no accident that when my informants mention New Age, it tends to be in contexts where they express disgust. Or to the degree they believe themselves to be engaging in activities that they term New Age, it is always presented together with what they point out as their serious concerns<sup>54</sup>. The connotations to the superficial are produced by the investigative procedure itself. In earlier chapters I have touched upon some aspects of such transformation, and I have pointed out the necessity of reflecting upon the ontological and epistemological premises we build upon as researchers. In this paragraph I will continue probing into such issues, tracing further aspects of the investigative procedure that may render our informants incapable of valid insight.

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data-material that I have generated.

<sup>54</sup> My intention is not to present my informants as sinister, depressed people. The importance of having fun is explicitly pointed out by many of them, and implicitly reflected in observations I make along the way. Marit says that “*I feel that having fun in itself is also important. Dancing, for instance. I dance quite a bit. I feel this is self-development, too. Anything that may make life more colorful is good*”. But like every person I have ever met in my life, Marit does not take her life as such lightly. Indeed, she is quite a philosopher, like so many more with her.

Discerning patterns of the kind Heelas does, or as I do myself in the first chapters of this text, requires that a certain amount of data-material is produced. The investigator has to look at an accumulation of data-material. Doing so implies that we lump together elements that would be mutually exclusive for the individual informant. Our *data-material* contains a “hotchpotch” of elements. But when looking at the individual stories told by the individual informants, it becomes clear that each person elaborates upon certain carefully selected elements in specific ways that show consistency, even over years. A proponent of the strong version of Karma will elaborate on themes in ways that can be clearly distinguished from the elaborations of proponents of non-control versions. The activities that are relevant for Marit are not the same as Martin would engage in. Hans, with his shaven head and tattoos has interests that neither Marit nor Martin shares: rave parties and drugs are foreign elements in their stories. What their respective quests of seeking entails differ in ways that are quite systematic. If I had not presented their stories in the coherent manner I do in the last chapters, but continued an approach where I divided people’s stories into themes and elements, I would have glossed over important aspects of difference and coherence, blinding us to potential dynamics following in their wake (as well as producing them).

Depicting seeking as a randomly stirred porridge of elements, or using the shopping metaphor creates discrepancies: between the knowledge generated by the analytical process, and the knowledge the seeker has about the reality s/he relates to. What is more, these discrepancies imply dismissal of the experience and stories of our informants, if ever so inadvertently. I am not saying that the researcher should reduce her/his role to merely reproducing the statements of informants. Research is about generating new knowledge. But this knowledge should not replace the knowledge of our informants; it should rather embrace and account for the existence of different knowledges. Differences that make a difference to our informants are phenomena in themselves, not to be glossed over.

Analysis always implies reduction and transformation, in the sense that our tools allow some aspects of whatever phenomenon we are studying to be put under scrutiny, whereas other aspects may be neglected, or never even perceived in the first place. Looking at an accumulation of data-material is in a sense committing a mathematical exercise. There is nothing wrong about that, it can open up for seeing plurality as well as patterns herein. It is, however, important to remember that distance loses out on subtleties only proximity can reveal. Analysis is an exercise in *dynamic movement*, and we should not merely move in one direction, we should constantly return to our point of departure, move back and fourth,

assuming different perspectives and points of entry, moving from close-ups to utilizing a more distant gaze, and moving back again. As researchers we make stories, too. We may get caught in the dynamics of writing itself, ending up creating what Deleuze and Guattari call a false conception of a voyage and movement (1988), a voyage that also may take us very far away from lived immediacy.

### **10.1.2 More on the creation of gaps**

In general, as spatio-temporal constructs (Knudsen 1990), life-stories are not static entities, experience is always subject to ongoing interpretation and re-interpretation. As such ongoing processes, incorporating the time-dimension, life-stories constitute, and are constituted by, the phenomenon of memory. The aspect of memory points to the context of life-stories as being about more than meets the eye. Even though I can be alone in a room with an informant, by way of dialogue and narration our conversation weaves us into what Middleton and Edwards call “contexts of community, broader politics and social dynamics” (1990:3). Middleton and Edwards draw attention to the way memories are not just products of individual processing-facilities alone. Their approach moves beyond a concern with individual memory as a process or content. They reintroduce memory as a phenomenon not only arising within a social context, but as constituted by social activities. Innumerable ‘voices’ resound in our reflections when we tell life-stories.

These social aspects of life-stories are what make them valid social scientific objects of study. However, I am also aware of the fact that these understandings may represent a gap between different kinds of knowledge. For instance: The way I experience my own memory, it is not of a phenomenon through which ‘voices’ across time and space speak, as put by Bakhtin (1991). I don’t believe it is far fetched to assume that the same goes for other human beings as well. In general, I believe the experience of whole-ness and mine-ness of what is referred to as ‘my’ memories, ‘my’ thoughts and ‘my’ feelings, are so basic that the moment a person starts to experience memories, thoughts and feelings as voices, as not being part of herself/himself, this tends to be conceived of as constituting a disease in our society. The experience of ‘mine-ness’ pertaining to life-stories and memories is a phenomenon in itself, one that I cannot ignore when conducting narrative analysis.

What is more: there is more to life-stories than construction and fluctuation. I had several conversations with Marit and Martin over a period of two years. They are both engaging in

seeking, they both attempt at bringing about changes in their lives. Combined with the fluctuating story-model I have presented in this paragraph, as well as in previous chapters, I would have expected to see more changes in their stories than what turned out to be the case. Instead it is as if they both are truly struggling with something, which cannot be changed by merely telling a different story about it. Marit says that “*there is a lot of tough work to be done to become free*”, she says that people in general struggle; “*even people who have been working terribly hard with their lives for a long, long time*”. When I first talked to him, Martin reports that he is in the middle of a life crisis. The first time. The second time. The third time. The fourth time. The repetition tells a story in itself. After two years, when finally reporting seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, he looks back at what he has been through, and exclaims: “*It has taken an amazing amount of time!*” I am not saying that change does not take place. But Marit as well as Martin explicitly reports an experience of resiliency and constraint in their attempts at bringing about change. This resistance towards change can also be seen by the fact that they keep returning to the same issues and challenges over such a long period of time. Some times the aspect of resiliency even seems to have the upper hand, and they are forced to thematize it as such: “*it is as if we are cursed...*”

I had four conversations with each of them over a period of two years. In spite of this time-span, the themes that are elaborated upon in their individual stories are so consistent, that when gathering all the interviews into one document, the document turned out so coherent that it was impossible to tell where one conversation ended and the other began. This coherence was not due to any additional writing on my behalf. I just pasted the different transcriptions together, chronologically, to make one single document I could work on. Indeed, now and then there were elements indicating whether the interview was conducted early on or late, like when Martin tells about looking for a job, and when he starts to describe his new job. Looking for a job came before finding one. Apart from such elements, there is not much of a difference between the first and the last conversations. The fact that Martin actually ends up defining himself as a Christian, adds to my puzzlement of consistency: I would have expected his conversion to imply more changes to be visible in the stories he tells. But in spite of his conversion, I can tell by merely watching the issues being elaborated upon, as well as the way they are elaborated upon, that also the last conversation is also very much with Martin. The elements of stability are remarkable.

One could argue that some of the elements of stability could be related to me, as I would follow up issues introduced in former conversations. However, it is not as much the issues

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introduced by me, as *the way they are elaborated upon* by my informants that I look at, when pointing out stability. Whatever issues my informants elaborate upon, given by me or introduced by them, there are some *themes* that they keep returning to and repeating. These themes are not introduced by me. Marit keeps talking about others as exerting pressure, and the necessity of dealing with this, is weaved into whatever issue she talks about. Martin keeps talking about the impossibility of having control, which is a theme he keeps weaving into whatever issue he talks about. And so on. The different informants chose to elaborate on whatever issue I introduced in very different ways. They came up with their own themes and concerns, and then I tried to follow these up. The way the conversations with Marit developed, is very different from the way the interviews with Martin developed. In spite of me introducing the same issues to begin with, the conversations developed very differently. And if I asked about something they found irrelevant, you could be certain that after a couple of sentences of seemingly humoring me, they would return with force to their respective themes. The first time Marit and I talk, she ponders the same themes as the last time we talk. The same goes for Martin. Martin sticks to his themes, Marit sticks to hers. They keep doing so over a time span of two years. This makes their stories very distinct, and this distinctiveness is retained over time. The stabilizing factors at work cannot merely be accounted for by my presence, or the questions that I asked. It must be sought elsewhere.

## 10.2 *Locating resiliency*

### 10.2.1 Beyond construction

The need for continuity constitutes one element of restraint that the narrator of life-stories has to relate to: Stephanie Taylor points out how who I am must follow who I (claim to) have been. She says, “there is not an infinite play of positions but flexibility within requirements of plausibility and consistency” (2003:196). Others have also pointed out the existence of restraints that the narrator operates within when re-writing life-stories, for instance Kirkman (2003). She examines barriers to the revision of autobiographical narratives of motherhood, addressing the narrative aspects of mourning. Schutz captures an important aspect of resiliency through the concept of relevance (Schutz 1970). The individual is portrayed as a bricoleur, but as a bricoleur operating within restraints: the world of working is not only an object of our actions; it also constitutes a framework within which these actions are performed, he says.

Life-stories are constructions. But whereas a fictional story can be rewritten in seconds, a life lived is not rewritten as easily. The concept of life-story makes a distinction: Between stories a person can tell from her life, as opposed to fairy-tales, short stories, novels, etc. I am quite aware that this distinction is problematic – any distinction is, when the analytical gaze is put upon it. Stories about others and fictional stories can function as metaphors to communicate central aspects of the narrator's own experience (Eide 1997). Distinctions between the informant's own story and stories s/he tells about others become blurred. However, this way of understanding life-stories takes quite an analytical effort to get at. The analytical gaze may blur distinctions, and thereby grasp certain aspects of the reality we are dealing with. But the narrator experiences a difference that makes a difference, between the telling of events from her life and the telling of a fairy-tale.

If I put aside the model of the fluid story, and forget all about what I have learnt about narrative analysis, the stability of Marit's and Martin's stories does not surprise me. The fluid model is something that I have seen may hold the potential of being strongly opposed to aspects of my own experience. Any model of understanding that only fits for others, not myself, makes me stop and think. Somehow I must relate to the following aspects in the stories of informants: I know that I myself can tell stories of personal experience that I would do anything to get rid of or be able to perceive differently. Still, they seem to change little. The intensity of emotions can change, as well as the type of emotions felt in relation to the remembered event. Conflicting emotions can also be simultaneously experienced. I can tell different stories about what has happened, even contradictory ones – ambiguity can be a central feature of experience. But, there are limits to what kind of versions I can tell without leaving some essential aspect of experience behind. I must assume that this is also the case with my informants as well.

If I forget all about narrative analysis, I know, and have always known, that the immediate experience of memory is not one of construction, but of some kind of past that can appear as real as the experience of life here and now. Sometimes the experience of the past can be even stronger than the experience of the present. Remembering can be experienced as the past manifesting itself all over again. In a way my memories carry a strong resemblance to phenomena being perceived. Within phenomenology, remembering has actually been likened to a form of perception (Merleau-Ponty 2002). This seems to capture some aspects of life-stories pertaining to the resilient. Perception within phenomenology can be understood as presenting an object to us. Sartre uses models derived from Gestalt psychology. Gestalt



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means form, figure, appearance. What we perceive is not incoherent sense data that we arrange into forms and figures. On the contrary, Gestalt is conceived of as what is originally given through perception (Sartre 1994). Any object is always given in a mixture of presences and absences. Looking at a table from above makes looking at it from below impossible, and vice versa. When I see one side of it, the other sides are absent. If I change my position in the room and look at the table from below, the perspective from above will be beyond my ken. But this does not make me experience the table as a flow of incoherent appearances, because I see more than what meets the eye: what is absent is also part of what I experience. When I hear a melody I do not experience a lot of single tones and notes. I experience the numerable tones and notes as a whole, as I experience *a melody*. Consciousness is *of* something. It intends the identity of objects.

The identity can also be given when the object is remembered: “Remembering provides another set of appearances, another manifold through which one and the same object is given to us. Memory involves a much more radical kind of absence than does the co-intending of absent sides during perception, but it still presents the same object. It presents the same object, but with a new noematic layer: as remembered, as past” (Sokolowski 2000:66-67). The comparison of memory with perception makes the process of remembering into a phenomenon that somehow involves the whole body, with all its perceptive powers. Young uses the title “The Memory of the Flesh” in an article addressing how memory can be seen as incarnated; “flesh remembers” (Young 2002). This is a use of metaphors depicting the process of remembering as a body immersed in the world, infusing remembering with characteristics beyond matters of strategic construction. Remembering is seen as a form of re-living earlier perceptions. Sokolowski says that memories can be understood as experiencing in the fullest sense, as the past in a sense is relived through them: What distinguishes the past from the now is that it comes to life with a special kind of absence that we cannot bridge by going anywhere, the way we can bridge the absences of the other side of the table by going over to another part of the room (Sokolowski 2000:68). A phenomenon like haunting memories can be grasped by such a model. So can the resiliency that Marit and Martin report to be struggling with.

To avoid any misunderstandings I have to point out that comparing memory to perception does not imply introducing perception as being ‘untainted’ by interpretation. Perception itself has been pointed out as a process of judging and inferring. Oakeshott dismisses what he calls “the superstition that the knowledge of direct acquaintance, unlike any other kind of

knowledge, is immediate, in the sense of being not in the form of concepts.” He claims that no separation is possible between reality and experience. He does not see direct knowledge as an independent kind of knowledge: direct knowledge is understood as knowledge presented in the form of a world of ideas expressly characterized as mine (Oakeshott 1966:53). This characterization of mine-ness is basic to a person’s experience of her memories. The past represents no less, no more, direct knowledge than the present. But the perspective phenomenology gives on the phenomenon of remembering provides an enrichment of our understanding of the life-story. When telling life-stories, I can be understood as relating to aspects of the past perceived here and now. A person remembering can be understood as being what Sokolowski calls a dative to whom the past manifests itself (2000).

This is not the same as making any conclusions upon the reality of the object: “A phenomenologist is only concerned with phenomena, what is immediately given. To intuit an object does not mean, then, that this object exists, but only that it is present to my consciousness in a certain way” (Velarde-Mayol 2000, my emphasis). Furthermore, when I point out the experienced ‘mine-ness’ of memories and their embodied nature, it may point in an individualized direction. This is not my intention. The body is very much a social phenomenon, and experience arises within social contexts. The embodied character of memories does not put them outside the social realm. I am not removing memory or life-stories from the social context from which they arise. My intention is to capture yet another aspect of life-stories: how memories are beyond the total control of the person remembering. The past manifests itself, and the narrator has to relate to aspects of the given when composing life-stories. Schutz points out that the activities of consciousness “take place within a very restricted scope of discretion. These activities themselves have their history: they are the sedimentation of previously experienced events and are thus themselves constituted and inter-connected into an experiential framework or context” (Schutz 1970:5). The image of the narrator as an active creator of stories is thus infused with boundaries within (and/or with) which s/he must operate.

If the elements of constraint and resiliency aren’t well enough accounted for in an approach emphasizing the fluid nature of life-stories, the life-story, and thus implicitly, seeking, will be portrayed as a much ‘lighter’, ‘easier’ and a more superficial phenomenon than an approach where the aspect of resiliency, and the struggle it implies, is accounted for. The model of the fluctuating story, and the emphasis on construction, seems predominant in narrative analysis in general. But, if we use models of understanding that portray life-stories as *merely* relative,

fluctuating phenomena, they may become phenomena that are easier to dismiss. To be considered a truth claim, a statement or a story must be understood as referring to something carrying some stability. The *aboutness* of language must be taken in consideration. If this aboutness is ignored in favor of models portraying life-stories as merely strategic constructions, as merely relative, contextual and fluctuating constructions, we are actually placing the stories of our informants outside the realm of what can be considered relevant truth claims. Doing so is committing an act of violence towards the narrator in question. This is why I believe that the distinction that Critical Realism makes between the transitive and the intransitive dimensions is so important to integrate in a phenomenology of narratives.

### 10.2.2 The resilient and the fragile

When Marit tells about the time she started having growing doubts, something new is entering her narrative. There is a ‘before’ and there is an ‘after’ in her story that can be spotted at different levels. Looking at the transcripts of the interview, I can see a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ through the manner in which she narrates: the prolonged and frequent pausing, as well as reflections replacing mere matter of fact narration (matter of fact, as in “*we went to China*”, “*the police arrested us*”, reflections being evaluations like “*doing what is right for me*”, “*it was great*”). When her story moves beyond the turning point, the story starts to flow again. The fact that the story regains its flowing character constitutes a mark, a turning point in itself.

However, the turning point constitutes much more than changes visible to the naked eye when reading the transcript of our conversation. True, a turning point can be discerned by looking at the way her story is constructed. But there is more to it. The turning point is not just something that can be found in the way her narrative is constructed. Her story is *about* something. The ‘before and after’ can be seen in the ‘facts’ she narrates as such: she used to engage in missionary activities; then she quit engaging in missionary activities. She used to be with certain Christian people; then she stopped spending time with them. These are ‘facts’ in the sense that by observing her at the time the events took place, they could have been verified by any observing person, regardless of what, how or whether Marit chose to communicate. Marit is relating to what Critical Realism calls *the intransitive dimension* of reality, which creates the very *aboutness* of her stories.

I have heard voices in academia claim that turning points are merely *ad hoc* constructions in the story told. I don’t subscribe to this point of view. Marit is telling about events that any

observer might have verified: she used to be certain places, doing certain things; then she stopped going there. She used to spend time with certain people; then she stopped spending time with them. Marit tells me that these changes were accompanied with, indeed triggered by, her reflections and emotional responses. She elaborates upon how the changes that took place, in itself triggered further reflections and emotional responses. Marit tells me that she found herself alone, quite literally, going through a difficult time. And she continues: Former friends in the Christian environment confronted her, warned her, telling her to think through her situation seriously, being of the opinion that she was on the wrong path. Marit reports experiencing heavy pressure, threats of an eternity of damnation looms large. Her story is constructed with a turning point. But reducing such a story about change, presented as deeply emotional, significant and difficult into merely an ad-hoc construction, having no foundation outside of itself, is ethically as well as ontologically problematic. It constitutes a violation of trust: such an approach is synonymous with not granting another person the position to make any relevant truth-claim. What is more, if I do so, I present an ontology that is non-coherent, as I am granting the reality I produce as a researcher status as 'more real' than that of my informants. Understanding the knowledge of the researcher as positioned, such a claim does not make sense. If I make the stories of my informants into something that cannot be given status as truth-claims, the same has to go for my stories as a researcher as well. And what, indeed, would be the point of fieldwork, if the stories we tell are nothing but fiction anyway?

I assume the way Marit would have told me about these events twenty years ago would probably have differed from the way she tells me about them today (or twenty years from now for that matter). Indeed, she ponders such changes herself. But something happened that she reports as most significant. Leaving most of your friends behind, a whole social environment and a way of living, I assume it would probably be considered significant for anybody to be making such a choice. The fact that the meaning such an event has may change over time, cannot reduce the change into being merely an *ad hoc* turning-point in a made-up story. That is neglecting the very nature of the life-story as a phenomenon: as being about experience, grounded in life lived, implying a time-dimension with actual events following actual events. How these events are perceived, understood and narrated certainly involves interpretation and construction. But life-stories are generated by embodied beings, making sense of embodied experience. Life-stories relate to so much more than I as a researcher can access by way of narrative interviewing. But the limits of methods and methodology must not be confused with the life-story as operating within such limitations. Language, narrative and experience intertwine. But from where I stand as a researcher, relating to another experiencing human

being, I have to make a distinction between *the turning point as it manifests itself in the stories* told, and *the turning point as an experienced event*, as experienced by my informant. As an outsider I will never be dealing with more than tip of the iceberg. Only the experiencing person can sense her/his anchorage, it cannot be observed by others (Steeves 2004:15).

Martin tells about his experience of crisis as something that just won't change, no matter how hard he tries. There is an interconnection between the stories we tell ourselves and our experiences. But this must not be confused with believing that changing our experiences is an easy matter of just telling ourselves a different story. Martin is telling me about an aspect of being that seems to be beyond his efforts, there is some kind of *haunting* taking place, that an emphasis on life-stories and experiences through models of construction cannot account for well. Martin's recurring theme, of "*total control as impossible*", of us as unable to bring about changes ourselves, is based in his own experience of certain realities manifesting themselves, regardless of his efforts. Whatever conglomerate of experiences that constitute his crisis, it keeps manifesting itself over and over again. This haunting is a phenomenon that Martin has to relate to: "*I could not get rid of the pain*".

There seem to be different aspects of aboutness. Marit's narratives illustrate the way she makes her own interpretations, feelings and reflections into objects of reflection. She reflects on her own reflection, she interprets her own interpretation. She tells me about how she used to think about events at the time when they took place; she tells me about what she is thinking about the events now, comparing different perspectives and ponders their development. But she never questions that certain events actually took place, and that these events implied changes. Her story seems to incorporate aboutness at different levels. However, the different levels of aboutness all seem to relate to aspects of resiliency.

Making *experience itself* into an issue necessitates the search for concepts that can grasp this important distinction, this *difference that makes a difference*, between *the resilient* and *the fragile*. Husserl (1973) distinguishes between two kinds of very different experiences, in a way that can be seen as analogous to these issues I am pointing out here. He distinguishes between originary and arbitrary presentations. What Husserl calls "the intuition of essences" belongs to the first category; originary presentation. Husserl claims that the "intuition of essences" is a *spontaneous experience*, not a creative one. On the other hand, arbitrary presentations are when we notice that an object is created by our own mental activity. We are

*conscious of its production; we experience that they are constructs*, something that we cannot say of the intuition of essences, he says. Husserl has been criticized for the intuitional, essentializing tenor of much of his work. But experiencing life *is* experiencing essences, which can keep manifesting itself regardless of our efforts at ‘exorcism’ or deconstruction. The distinction he makes between the experiences of the spontaneous and the constructed grasps important aspects of experienced reality. If we don’t account for these aspects of experience, we cannot do justice to the life-worlds of our informants.

### **10.2.3 The aboutness of language**

Making the life-story into an object of study is at the same time relating to language in a way that is remote from our everyday usage of it. Sartre says that “the speaker experiences words the same way as she feels her own body; the speaker is surrounded by a body of language she hardly notices” (Sartre 2002). Language, in our everyday usage, is at one level ‘invisible’. This ‘invisibility’ was pointed out half a century ago by Hjelmslev, a theoretician of language. He proposed the following thesis: that language wants to be ignored, as it is what he calls its nature given intention to be a means and not an end (Hjelmslev 1943). By conducting narrative analysis, however, I ‘freeze’ language, and I put focus upon the stories told and the language carrying them as such. Language is transformed from what can be called the invisible state into something visible. The transformation we see manifested as transcription and writing is actually a manifestation of a transformation that starts the very moment language is put under analytic scrutiny. Language is transformed from the means that “wants to be ignored” into something that can be put in quotation marks, and, metaphorically speaking, can be studied through a magnifying glass.

When my informants have created life-stories, they have related to the aboutness of language that Hjelmslev points out. When I have written this text, I have related to the aboutness of language as well. In chapter seven I extracted elements from stories told by many different informants to create one coherent story about events in the past – the history of the groups. Or rather, *a* history. In doing so, I am assuming the existence of a past, in which events have actually taken place. The events may be interpreted and understood differently, but some kind of event has taken place. For instance, either Arne Tørjesen put an ad in the newspaper, or he did not. Either Karmapa came to Norway, or he did not. Either the hippies lived together at KTL, or they did not. This is the kind of aboutness that refers to observable phenomena. I have also utilized another kind of aboutness: people’s elaborations on how they thought and

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felt regarding the events in question, their reflections on the way one event has led to another, and how they came to be where they are today. From looking at this aspect of aboutness, I have been able to discern certain patterns, similarities and differences, pertaining to what elements they incorporate in the stories they tell, and in which way they are being incorporated. I have also been able to see how the themes and modes of elaboration are patterns that repeat themselves over time. A major concern for Marit twenty years ago was the pressure she experienced others as representing. Today she expresses dealing with the very same challenge. The aspect of resiliency embraces all dimensions of aboutness.

From a phenomenological perspective this is not surprising. The aspect of resiliency is not there because it relates to observable events in any 'extramental world'. Indeed, the notions of "an intramental world" and "an extramental world" are pointed out by Oakeshott as incoherent in the first place, as examples of what he says Ezra Pound called "idea-clots". Oakeshott says that "To insist upon the separation of knowledge and reality is, then, to commit ourselves to an absurdity which will serve only to throw open the door to more of its kind". He says that "things" cannot be conversed into ideas of facts, knowledge cannot be seen as the transformation into experience of something which is not itself experience. He says that the division into "experiencing" and "what is experienced" is an artifact created by analysis itself, as "experiencing" and "what is experienced" are, taken separately, meaningless abstractions, and he claims that they cannot be separated (Oakeshott 1966:9).

In the phenomenological sense, experience is that which stands for *the concrete whole*. Sokolowski points out the distinction that phenomenology makes between moments and pieces, and in this paragraph I draw heavily upon his explanations and choice of words. I find his way of explaining simple and illuminating for my purposes. He explains that a piece is a part of a whole that also can exist by itself. For instance, I can cut a piece of cake, I can pick a flower off a tree, and the piece of cake or the flower can continue to exist even if the tree itself burns down, or the rest of the cake is eaten. Moments, however, exist only as blended with their complementary parts. Sokolowski explains: Vision is a moment to the eye. Without the eye, there is no vision. But we may begin to think about vision as though it could exist by itself, apart from the eye. He says that we are misled by a reification of the concept 'vision'. Because of this mistake, an artificial philosophical problem arises about how the original whole can be reconstituted. While the true solution is simply "to show that the "part" in question was a moment, not a piece, and that it should never have been separated from the whole in the first place" (Sokolowski 2000:25). The mind is, within the phenomenological

point of view, a moment to the world, and Sokolowski says that the “*cogito ergo sum*” not merely implies the existence of the thinker: because every thought is *about* something, *directed towards something*. His conclusion is, that if the *cogito* can imply the existence of the “I am”, it also implies the existence of whatever “something” intended by consciousness. Sokolowski explains the ‘I’ as a thing in this world, but a thing like no other: It is a thing that cognitively *has* the world, the thing to whom the world as a whole manifests itself.

The turning point in Marit’s story tells about changes that took place in here life. I can tease out distinctions between the observable aspects of the events narrated, and the meaning she infuses into the changes in question. So can Marit: she elaborates on her own interpretations. Yet, the interpretative and affective components are interlinked to whatever events that triggered them. Her memories embrace affective components as well as ‘observable facts’. I am not claiming that memories manifest themselves as identical to any original experience. I am, however, claiming that when memories manifest themselves, they embrace all aspects of aboutness. This means, that the impact the changes in Marit’s life had on her, her emotions, reflections, perceptions, are also characterized by a resiliency towards change, not just the ‘observable’ aspects. In fact, I don’t find it unreasonable that affective components of events can keep manifesting themselves, in spite of the ‘empirical event’ or details being ‘forgotten’. This can be understood as *the body remembering*. Who hasn’t woken up in the morning after something bad has happened, for instance the death of a loved one. You wake up with a horrible feeling, but you have to think hard to remember what it is that is horrible. And what were the scary feelings that arose from the yoga-exercise I participated in all about? The aspect of aboutness that every life-story has to relate to, does not delimit itself to ‘empirical’ matters in the sense of being about ‘observable events’, it embraces all aspects of experience.

Seeking and life-stories intertwine. The way we understand and approach life-stories in general will also taint our perception of seeking. If we cannot do justice to the complexity and depth of life-stories, we cannot do justice to people’s quests of seeking.

## 10.3 *Navigating multidimensionality*

### 10.3.1 Time and space

The development that all my informants emphasize as important implies a time-dimension, and movement along it. To see miserable events as blessings, one has to embrace the idea of



'*going somewhere*', and the blessed misery as a means of '*getting there*'. Marit keeps emphasizing the importance of "*moving on*". Martin upholds anxiety and depression as something that "*drives us forward*". Suffering can acquire the quality of a blessing because it is seen as a tool for bringing about a change. This in turn implies ideas of me as something that actually can be transformed, an understanding of subjectivity as moldable substance. In the stories of my informants, the present seems to be made into a place of dwelling, as cultivated through the practice of meditation. Simultaneously, the quest for transformation makes the present into "an instrument for realizing the future: the person we are to become" (Øian 1998:10-11, 361). A quest for transformation relies on what Øian calls a model of linear time, with an understanding of the future as an *open space*. By way of their stories, my informants conjure up a field of tension between movement and dwelling, different modes of being in time, modes that I also elaborated upon when pointing out the way doing research implies a drive towards something to be accomplished in the future, a cultivation of language, reflection and reasoning incompatible with the letting go that meditational techniques cultivate. By portraying fields of tension, my informants narrate spatiality, a multidimensional reality that seeking can be understood as attempts to navigate.

A lot of what Marit says, seems to be about "*taking her life back*", or about her "*ownership*" to her life. She wants to have a life in which she is *engaged*, a life that she feels as being a *part of*. Indeed, the divine itself is portrayed as immanent, part of her, nature and all sentient beings. An alternative is depicted as a real threat: talking about "*drawn-out suicide*" is referring to ways of living life that cuts her out of the equation. Through her participation and dialogue with people showing an interest in the issues she finds important, she can be understood as creating links between herself and others. Through meditational techniques she can be understood as cultivating the sense of 'the porous, interconnected me', which can be understood as adding to the sense of *being part of*. I believe that one aspect of what Marit engages in can be understood as integration, a process of embedding herself as part of her own life, claiming it. To do so, she applies many strategies. She actively seeks out certain social environments, she engages in bodily techniques and philosophies. The sense of integration seems to be intimately linked with the chiseling out of a space that is *hers*. Seeking up environments where she feels she can talk about what matters to her, where she does not feel pressured, can be understood as creating space, literally as well as metaphorically, in which she can exist.

Many aspects of the stories of my informants bear witness of life-stories as arising from a corporeally experienced reality. Images of depth and length as well as dynamic movement are conjured up, talked about in metaphors implying organic life. My informants report avoiding what they perceive as ‘dead’ and ‘static’, as in “*dead practice*” and “*dogma*” – whatever does not bring about “*growth*”. Which is opposed to what can be put to use to bring about a change, what is described as “*alive*” or “*vital*”, which can be related to their “*path*” - movement and development along a time-space continuum. Even knowledge is talked about in metaphors implying space and movement in a multitude of directions: the importance of knowledge being “*grounded*” in one’s own experience, and the necessity of “*going in depth*”. In the following paragraphs I will pursue ways of narrating that in themselves tell stories about the realities people experience, and thus add to an understanding of life-stories as arising from bodies immersed in the world.

### **10.3.2 Inside-outside and corporeal reality**

Johan has made something that looks like an altar, a collection of items like candles, Buddha-statues and incense, nicely arranged on a table with a tablecloth on. He presents it as “*reminders*”. He expresses an understanding of what he surrounds himself with, as something that will have an influence on his mind, as steering what you think. By arranging an altar, Johan is actually working on his own mind, he tells me. I understand what he tells me as a story of mind as ‘out there’, not just in his head. What he says and does can be understood as making ‘mind’ into something tangible, something that can be worked upon by literally touching it. Johan also tells me that lighting the candles on the altar is something he sometimes thinks about as a sacrifice. He depicts it as giving something away. It is a visualization and reminder of the central principle of “*letting go*” and of “*giving*”, part of the exercises he engages in to work on his own “*mental patterns*”, he tells me. Relating to the altar is presented as not just being about relating to items placed on a table. Relating to the altar is presented as working on his own mind as well as his relationships to others. Johan can be understood as having created a realm in which inside and outside fuse, in which items are presented as mind, and mind as items, allowing him to work directly on his own mental patterns as well relating to others. The altar is about ‘Johan-in-the-world’.

Hans expresses some of the same understandings when he talks about how what we surround ourselves with will become part of us: by hanging pictures on the walls we are understood as working on our minds. He also says that when we have an emotion, we are in touch with

every other human being who has that emotion. When cultivating certain “*qualities*”, as he puts it, “*these qualities will exist*”. Hans is new to Buddhism, but he is not new to engaging in different techniques of the body. He is “*an old raver*”, he tells me. Raving and spirituality has been written about in literature addressing so called “post-traditional religiosity”, especially “New Age” and “Neo-Paganism” (St.John 2004). Central in these studies have been concepts like “re-enchantment” and “embodied spirituality”: “Melting into the crowd, the raver participates in an ecstatic collectivity, a unity that challenges the ontological certainties of Western thought by destabilizing such foundational oppositions as self/other and mind/body” (Landau in St.John 2004:107). Hans explains his feelings as implying being in touch with every other being having that emotion. Not only by way of raving, but also in his stories, he probes into oppositions between self/other and mind/body, emphasizing aspects of collectivity and unity, portraying reality as one of flowing continuations rather than one with clear-cut distinctions. Yet, by challenging distinctions, at another level he confirms them, by the mere fact that they are thematized: There is a ‘something’ that he grapples with all through his stories, arising as fuzzy fields of tension – inside/outside, himself/others, body/mind. Csordas says that the ontological status of our inevitable dualities is not such that they are “there” to be discovered, but that they are “consequences of embodiment at the condition of existence”. Csordas maintains that it is the same indeterminacy that will collapse dualities that generated them in the first place, and says that this indeterminacy is something we come face to face with “in the immediacy of lived experience” (1997:278). The fields of tension that Hans conjures up by way of his stories can be understood as such indeterminacy. Hans thematizes, confirms, rejects, denies, dissolves and generates foundational oppositions, all at once, as he narrates ‘Hans-in-the-world’. In fact, all my informants can be understood to do so.

### 10.3.3 Animated realities

Rannveig says, “*I have always been drawn towards the mystic and the occult*”. In Rannveig’s story, it is as if the phenomena she refers to are animate somehow, exerting some kind of pull. She senses “*being drawn to*”. She conjures up an animated reality that can touch her, one that she *interacts with*, instead of merely *acting upon*. She says that at high school “*there was so much that was not me*”. This is a time she talks about as one of estrangement. Rannveig, as well as Marit, seems to be working on making the world a place of belonging, into something they are part of, and which is also part of them. Engaging in such work seems to imply that ‘being part of’ is not something that is given; it must be reached for. Rannveig, as well as

Marit, (and many more), puts emphasis on sensations. Marit does this by using the word “*feel*” a lot. Rannveig does this by talking about “*being drawn to*”. The steps that these two women take in their lives seem to be steered by some kind of embodied sensation, or rather; it seems like they try to navigate in accordance with physically manifested sensations. Rannveig tells me that traveling just to travel is something she does not find interesting. Her travels have to be related to “*her path*”. This reminds me of Marit’s emphasis on her choices of religious or other activities as anything but random; her sense of “*an inner core*”, something she reports that whatever phenomenon she encounters has to resonate with to become relevant.

Martin emphasizes that we are not in control, he talks about processes that “*grab you*”. His story is very distinct in that he reports transcendental peaks in very specific episodes with “*religious experience*”, as he puts it. His experience is one of a power that he says can only be made sense of by reference to God. Martin shows me an icon he has, explaining how icons are supposed to be windows to God. The Holy Trinity, or three angels are sitting at the table, and by sitting in front of the icon you are invited inside: “*You sit there at the fourth side surrounded by God. You are totally silent in front of God, and let him fill you up. Being present, being quiet, being open. Going through a process that changes.*” The God that Martin talks about, reminds me of the God that Marit relates to, in that God can be found through “*inner experience*”; in nature, or understood as “*filling you up*”. The divine as part of you is a common denominator. Martin talks about opening up for God as sparking “*a living process inside of you*”. Inger describes her encounter with Christianity as something she experienced as “*not alive*”, but “*dogmatic and stiff*”: “*it did not make me grow*”. Martin defines himself as a Christian, Inger has formally taken refuge at KTLBS. What they have in common, not only with each other but also with my other informants, is the emphasis on *living processes*: Growth, development, movement, life.

The aspect of animation reaches a peak in the story of Elisabeth. She reports that “*I sense energy from stones, from human beings, the energy of people*”. She experienced something beaming up from the crypt in Nidarosdomen, energy that made her “*disappear*”. She sensed becoming one with the falcon when attending a falconer course. She sensed the energies of Poseidon and Hera, to such an extent that others reported being hurt by the electricity she generated. Martin spoke of being sucked into an icon. Rannveig feels “*drawn to*”. The realities that are being portrayed are animated realities, exerting powers in themselves. Icons and crypts can suck people in, places can exert a pull, a cross can bid you welcome. In the

stories of many of my informants, events and things seem to have the propensity of organizing themselves and unfolding the paths that are to be walked. The world seems to be presented as something that can “*know*” you, “*speak*” to you, organize itself to embrace and lead you on. It seems like it is just a matter of cultivating your abilities to listen, and the activities my informants report engaging in, can be understood as implying such cultivation.

Elisabeth tells me about dreams she has had. Before she went to the falconer course, she had a dream about falcons, and this experience is presented as something that provided her with direction. She also tells about a dream where she was being embraced by the Dalai Lama, yet another dream that she reports as providing her with direction: she chose to go to summer courses at KSL. Also when talking to other informants, the issue of dreams came up. A couple of people told me about attending dream-groups in the eighties, before becoming engaged in Buddhism. One of these informants told me about a dream where he was driving a taxi in the forest, until reaching a border where the Dalai Lama was. At that point the taximeter showed 150 NOK. Which was the sum they paid for attending the dream group. The Dalai Lama said that he would take over driving, and that it, in fact, would not cost a thing. This informant tells me that after this dream he quit going to the dream group, and focused on Buddhism instead. Steeves (2004) says, that like perception, the dream maintains a *spatiality* for the *virtual body*. These informants can be understood as opening up dreams as a realm of enquiry, one of many. These informants are telling me about dreams as a means of providing direction, of being guided. Certainly, I never spoke to anybody who ran around enacting every dream s/he had. The dreams, when acted upon, seemed rather to be one of many indicators used in decision-making, yet another dimension of reality probed as a means of giving direction. The way that some of my informants talk, I am being drawn into a reality in which you are softly embraced by guidance, where you are not “*alone*”, you are rather “*steered*”, and the task is presented as one of listening, cultivating the ability to sense “*the push*” and “*the pull*” from “*the things themselves*”.

“I feel myself looked at by things”. Says not one of my informants, but Merleau-Ponty (1968). He refers to Paul Klee’s recounting of a walk in the woods: “I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me” (1964). Merleau-Ponty talks about “an “emigration” of my consciousness to the realm of things where I am “to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated... So that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen” (Merleau-Ponty in Steeves

2004). The tree, according to Steeves, is a reminder of the fact that even my own vision is grounded in the possibility of being seen (2004:144). He says that it is about reflective awareness as occurring not in a thought about the self, but in embodied experience: “and this experience, in turn, is an event that occurs within the flesh of Being, a Visibility or a Tangibility inaugurated in the very separation or *écart* between sensing and sensed (2004:145). Dillon explains that “the human body is that particular kind of flesh that allows the flesh of the world to double back on itself and be seen” (1990:169). To Merleau-Ponty, transcendence is “the ability of consciousness to be outside of itself and focused on projects within the world” (Steeves 1990:146). The recurring animated manner of speaking my informants utilize, can be understood as a way of reporting from a world they are “not just gazing upon”, but one “from which they breathe, feed and drink such that inner and outer corporeality intertwine” (Leder 1990:213-216). The stories of my informants tell about the experience of a most corporeal reality, one of which they are very much part.

### **10.3.4** Unfolding realms of enquiry

Looking at your thoughts and feelings implies taking a step back, making your own thoughts into ‘objects’, in the sense that they can be observed and contemplated, similar to the objectification Kapferer (1984) says takes place during a ritual performance. Kapferer makes a distinction between absorption and abstraction, and points out the slipping between them as basic to the workings of the ritual. Meditation is also about such constant slipping. The meditator continuously has to take a ‘step back’ to observe, as s/he is inevitably drawn into full engagement of thinking and feeling, over and over again. From absorption to abstraction, and back again. The meditator may be sitting still, but there is nothing static about the meditational process: it implies dynamic and continuous movement, as meditational techniques can be understood as opening up a specific kind of spatiality for the virtual body.

The thoughts and emotions that occur while meditating, the memories as well as scenarios of the future that manifest themselves, intends the realities in which the meditator exists – in the phenomenological sense that consciousness is always *of* something. It is as such consciousness is explored in meditation. The very point of meditation is explained to be about discovering how you are part of a larger context. In chapter one I elaborated on the way different meditational techniques can be understood as cultivating sensations and understandings of ‘the porous, transparent me’, creating an epistemological and ontological basis for conjuring up an interconnected reality. The encounter between my body and the

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ground can be thematized through the sensation of touch: is it me I am sensing, or the ground? Breathing, so central to meditational practice, air entering and leaving the body, inside becoming outside. Breathing is halfway between the autonomous nervous-system and our will – we breathe without thinking about it, but we can also control our breathing when directing attention to it. Breath can be said to be a realm of betwixt and between. Meditation seems to be a dwelling on, and within, the indeterminacy that characterizes ‘in-betweens’.

The way my informants talk about their quests of seeking, reveals an explicit focus on ‘twilight-zones’ in general, where different realms of being touch or fuse. I have pointed out how, for instance, dreams are being thematized by some of my informants, which can be understood as adding to my observation: Dreaming is a state in which we are neither totally conscious nor unconscious, but exist in a realm that people have been fascinated by through the ages, elaborated upon, interpreted and related to in countless ways. Twilight-zones can also be understood as created where a person working upon an altar or hanging pictures on the wall perceives it as working on his mind, and his relationships to others. Reports of icons and crypts that suck you up can be understood as yet another manifestation of ‘in-betweens’: it can be understood as an experience of what Csordas calls collapsing dualities (1997). God as inside you, or processes entering you, again I interpret it as dealing with points of crossing and fusing.

I see in-betweens thematized in the stories of my informants at other levels as well. When, for instance, Marit tells her stories, they are grounded in her embodied and situated being: her reflections arise from encounters with others, encounters with a reality she has to relate to somehow. In general, meeting and relating to ‘The Other’ creates a field of tension in which we must navigate. Relating to reality includes the experience of bumping your foot into a stone you did not know was there. The experience of ‘bumping into’ makes reality one that must be navigated, thematized, thought through and re-thought. Indeed, Csordas says that the very possibility of reflexivity is grounded in embodiment (1997:277). Marit’s elaborations are about ‘Marit-in-the-world’ – on encounters carrying indeterminacy with them, necessitating Marit’s interpretation and navigation. Her stories arise from such navigation. So do all the life-stories I have collected in this text.

I have already pointed out the distinction Husserl (1973) makes between *originary presentations* and *arbitrary presentations*. “The intuition of essences” belongs to the first category. Originary presentation he points out as a *spontaneous experience*, not a creative

one, whereas arbitrary presentations are when we notice that an object is created by our own mental activity. The techniques of meditation are about observing the fact that ‘thinking is occurring’. This can be understood as directing attention to the genesis of the spontaneous, in the sense that when meditating we observe how thoughts appear, and how emotions arise in their wake, and vice versa. We observe how associations are triggered by subtle stimuli, how memories as well as ideas about future scenarios manifest themselves, and by objectifying our experience, new aspects of the phenomena in question can be revealed. We sense the pressure of our bodies towards the ground – is it me, or the ground I am sensing? We sense the air going in and out of our bodies – where do I begin and end? Through the practice of meditation, the ordinary presentation, the experience of essences, as for instance the experience of an ‘I’, is intensely thematized. By drawing attention to the genesis of such ‘essences’, the meditator can be said to engage in transforming ordinary presentations into arbitrary presentations, as attention and awareness is drawn to how ‘an object’ is constituted in the first place.

By unfolding realms of enquiry through dwelling in and on in-betweens and foundational oppositions, a destabilization can be understood as brought about. It can be understood as an opening up for the creative. True, often the re-creative. But I also sense a potential for the novel: the transcendent leap Bhaskar (2000) describes as essential to all scientific discovery and human activity. My informants report from, and elaborate upon, fields of tension. Language and the body. ‘Me’ and ‘others’. Change and resiliency to change. They tell about navigating a multidimensional reality that acts upon them as well as being acted upon. Through the stories of my informants, I discern a reality infused with corporeality. Their stories seem to arise from a field of tension between invention and the given, between bricolage and restraint. My informants narrate in ways that indicate that they are ‘looked at’ as well as ‘looking’. They elaborate on fields of tension where improvisation and creative activity is not only allowed, but a necessity. Through their stories as well as the bodily practices they engage in, I discern a dwelling on, and within, the ‘in-betweens’ of being, probed into as a rich soil of indeterminacy, holding a promise of transformation. The outcome is not a given.



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