



Master Thesis in Cultural Encounters

Christian Meditation: a Path to Oneself and Others

A Qualitative Study of Christian Meditation and Cultural Encounters in Lives of Adults in Latvia

ECTS 60

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Abstract

This master thesis examines individual experiences regarding “Christian Meditation” of John Main and cultural encounters. Through qualitative interviews with Christian meditators the thesis aims to understand the subjective meanings of Christian Meditation from the informant’s point of view. The purpose of the thesis is to explore the subjective experiences of Christian Meditation and cultural encounters; and to explore the subjective experiences of the meaning of Christian Meditation in cultural encounters. Christian Meditation is a path to oneself, which goes through becoming aware of one’s dark sides and accepting them. It is a constant observing of the particular distress within oneself and letting it go. Christian Meditation functions as an anchor in the informants’ lives, which involves a greater focus on the present moment, inner peace and balance between one’s inner and outer life. Christian Meditation is experienced as contributing to one’s inner change, thus to transformation of one’s outer life, relationships. Christian Meditation serves as a ground for how one approaches others and the world. Cultural encounters are experienced as a personal meeting and dialogue, which involve individual efforts in order to truly meet other people. Encounters with other people of different cultures, promote a more comprehensive understanding of oneself. Christian Meditation plays a significant role in establishing a more profound cultural encounter. An inner dialogue and working individually on oneself in meditation is a way to experience a profound unity with other people. Christian Meditation promotes a deeper existential realization of belonging to other people. Shared meditation in the context of cultural encounters is experienced as developing a sense of community and silent relationship with other participants. Finally, Christian Meditation functions as a way to unify different spiritual practices in one’s life without experiencing them as conflicting.

Key words: Christian Meditation, John Main, contemplative prayer, cultural encounter, intrareligious dialogue, dialogue of life, dialogue of heart, silence, false self, true self

Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven undersøker individuelle erfaringer med Kristen Meditasjon i tradisjonen fra John Main og kulturelle møter. Gjennom kvalitative intervjuer med mennesker som gjennomfører Kristen Meditasjon forsøker masteroppgaven å forstå den subjektive betydningen av kristen meditasjon ut fra informantenes synsvinkel. Formålet med masteroppgaven er å utforske de subjektive erfaringene av Kristen Meditasjon og kulturmøter, og meningen med kristen meditasjon i møte med andre kulturer. Kristen meditasjon er en vei å forstå seg selv på, som går gjennom å bli oppmerksom på sine mørke sider og akseptere dem. Det er en vedvarende observasjon bestemte egne dype bekymringer med det mål å kvitte seg med dem. Kristen meditasjon fungerer som et større fokus på øyeblikket, indre fred og en god balanse mellom ens indre og ytre liv. Informantene gir uttrykk for at Kristen Meditasjon har bidratt til en indre endring, og gjennom det også forandringer av deres ytre liv og forholdet til andre mennesker. Kristen Meditasjon virker som et grunnlag for hvordan en nærmer seg andre mennesker og verden i sin alminnelighet. Kulturmøter er opplevd som et personlig møte og en dialog, som motiverer individuelt krafttak for å kunne møte andre mennesker på en åpen og inkluderende måte. Møter mellom mennesker med forskjellige kulturer fremmer en omfattende forståelse av en selv. Kristen Meditasjon spiller en betydelig rolle ved å etablere et mer gjennomgripende kulturmøte. En indre dialog og det å arbeide med seg selv gjennom meditasjon er en måte å erfare en dyptgående samforståelse med andre mennesker på kristen tradisjon fremmer en dypere eksistensiell realisering av det å høre til andre mennesker. Å dele meditasjon i forbindelse med kulturmøter blir opplevd som å utvikle en type fellesskap og skille samfølelse med andre deltakere Til slutt, Kristen Meditasjon fungerer som en måte å forene ulike åndelige praksiser i ens liv på uten å oppleve at det er noen konflikt mellom dem.

Nøkkelord: Kristen Meditasjon, John Main, kontemplativ bønn, kulturmøte, intrareligiøs dialog, dialog om livet, dialog om religiøs erfaring (dialog om hjerte), stillhet, den sanne selv, den falske selv

Foreword

The process of working with this thesis has been challenging, changing and profoundly meaningful to me. I feel very lucky and grateful that I could work with a topic that interests me so deeply. During this work I have addressed ultimate questions within myself and I am still only on the path to finding answers. I would like to thank everyone who has helped me along the way.

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Introduction

1.1 Approach

The overall subject of this study is Christian Meditation¹ and cultural encounters² in the lives of Christian meditators in Latvia. To gain insight into how people experience Christian Meditation, how they describe encountering other cultures and to acquire an understanding of how they experience the meaning of Christian Meditation in encountering other cultures, I interviewed 14 people who daily practise “Christian Meditation” of John Main³ in Latvia. In autumn 2013, I conducted qualitative interviews with each informant engaged in this particular meditation practice. The interview material allowed me to explore the descriptions of Christian meditators’ subjective experiences and standpoints regarding Christian Meditation and cultural encounters. The analytical approach applied in this research is a thematic analysis where the main themes are obtained on the basis of the interview material.

1.2 Thematic Focus and Research Questions

The starting point for this thesis was my interest in the topic as well as my wish to explore how people, who are engaged in Christian Meditation, experience the particular practice and what Christian Meditation means to them in relation to encountering other cultures. How do they experience Christian Meditation and what does it mean to them? How do they perceive other cultures and how do they relate to themselves and others when practising Christian Meditation daily?

Eastern types of meditation⁴ have been much researched. However, there exists little research on Christian Meditation concerning the individual’s experience of the particular meditation practice and its meaning in the context of cultural encounters.⁵ Therefore it is relevant and interesting to examine how people who practice Christian Meditation will express their own experiences of meditation and its meaning in encountering other cultures.

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the subjective experiences of Christian Meditation and cultural encounters in the lives of Christian meditators; and to explore the subjective experiences of the meaning of Christian Meditation in cultural encounters.

¹ The particular form developed by John Main OSB (1926-1982). A longer introduction to the particular type of meditation is presented in the section 1.6

² The use of the terms “culture” and “cultural encounter” in this study will be explained in Chapter three

³ John Main was a Roman Catholic priest and Benedictine monk who developed a meditation form called Christian Meditation. A better presentation of John Main is given in the section 1.5

⁴ Such as Zen, Transcendental Meditation, Buddhist meditation practices and others (see Thomas & Cohen, 2014).

⁵ I will elaborate on research history in the section 1.5

The main research questions that will be discussed in the analysis are:

1. What are the motives which encouraged the informants to start practising Christian Meditation?
2. How do Christian meditators interpret their experience of Christian Meditation?
3. How do Christian meditators interpret their experience of encountering other cultures?
4. How do the informants experience the meaning of Christian Meditation in encountering other cultures, including people with different cultural background and spiritual practices with a basis in another culture?

Cultural encounter and *culture* are broad concepts. Still, I decided to approach them from this wider perspective not to limit the informants' interpretations of their experiences of encountering different cultures. This research does not intend to theoretically approach the different meanings that the terms "culture" and "cultural encounter" encompass. It is rather an attempt to look at these concepts from an individual and personal perspective – from the perspective of the informants. However, it is still important to explore and define these concepts to provide the framework of the study, which is done in Chapter three.

1.3 The Context

In order to be able to understand the informants' relation to religion /spiritual practices and their path to Christian Meditation it is necessary to look at the historical status of religion in Latvia and the current religious context of Latvia.

Before the Soviet occupation⁶ the Catholic and Lutheran Churches⁷ were an integral part of Latvia's political system, yet, during the Soviet Union era (1945-1990), the state had control over of all aspects of public life, including the spiritual life. The Communist ideology was constantly directed at atheism⁸ or the denial of religion. All religious content was removed from schools, universities and libraries.⁹ Starting from 1944, the state had full control over the activities of religious organizations. The aim of the Religious Cult Affairs Council of USSR¹⁰

⁶ Latvia was invaded by the Soviet forces on June 17, 1940. From July 1, 1941 till 1945 Latvia was under the rule of Nazi Germany. The Soviet forces reoccupied Latvia during 1944-45.

⁷ United Evangelical Lutheran Church (In the West of Latvia) and Catholic Church (In the East of Latvia). As a result of the Reformation in Germany, Lutheranism spread to Latvia in 16th century. The Eastern part of Latvia came under the Polish control in the 16th century, thus Catholicism was strengthened there (Balodis, 2007, p. 1).

⁸ In 1964/1965 a mandatory course in the basics of scientific atheism was introduced in the higher educational institutions of USSR (Balodis, 1998, para. 10).

⁹ (Balodis, 1998, para. 2-4)

¹⁰ *PSRS Reliģijas kultu lietu padome* in Latvian. It was established in 1944.

was to divide and separate the clergy from within. A great number of the clergy was forced to be collaborationists, thus implementing the principle of “divide and conquer”.¹¹

The present Republic of Latvia is a democratic state that respects human rights, including freedom of religion.¹²

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, two major processes have occurred in Latvia: historically dominant churches struggle to strengthen their positions in society, while new religious movements and ideas from both East and West are growing rapidly. This triggers plurality of religious communities and individual religious identities influenced by global religious ideas.¹³ The traditional Churches¹⁴ have become increasingly diversified as other religions¹⁵ are claiming their positions in the religious sphere.¹⁶

1.4 Christian Meditation

Before proceeding to the chapters on methodology and theoretical framework, I find it necessary to present a short introduction to what Christian Meditation is, and to the actual Christian Meditation in Latvia.¹⁷

1.4.1 The Term “Meditation”

The words “meditation” and “meditate” in modern Western languages have their roots in the Latin terms “meditatio” and “meditari”. These terms were used to denote a monastic and spiritual practice, but they came originally with the translation of Greek texts where the counterparts were “melētē” and “meletán”, and were applied with John Cassian’s (c. 360 – 435)¹⁸ Latin transmission of the Egyptian monastic tradition. The word “meditatio” was then used to denote diverse Christian practices through the centuries, and finally it also became a term used to describe practices in other religions.^{19,20}

¹¹ (Balodis, 1998, para. 7-8; 2007, p. 3)

¹² In Latvia freedom of religion is incorporated into the Latvian Constitution (*Satversme*) and as a constitutional concept it has been included in the Latvian Constitution in accordance to the principle of international law “Principle of Respect of Human Rights” (Balodis, 2007, p. 1).

¹³ It is especially influenced by New Age spirituality. Such ideas play an important role in the formation of individual religious identities, which are inclined to diminish the religious authority especially of the large majority churches (Alisaukiene & Schröder, 2012, p. 3).

¹⁴ Lutheran, Catholic and Orthodox Churches

¹⁵ Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches, Eastern religions and other alternative spiritualities

¹⁶ (Alisaukiene & Schröder, 2012, pp. 2-3)

¹⁷ It is significant to point out that the term “Christian meditation” is often used to describe various contemplative practices. A practice which was developed by John Main and which the informants in this study practise is also called Christian Meditation. When I use meditation with the small letter I refer to a wider contemplative tradition in Christianity, whereas when I use Meditation with the capital letter I refer to the particular subject of this study.

¹⁸ A monk and ascetic writer who was the first to introduce the rules of Eastern monasticism into the West

¹⁹ (Rönnegård, 2013, pp. 79-80)

²⁰ This use of the terms denoting a monastic and spiritual practice mostly occurs in lists of ascetic practices, especially in the collection of *Apophthegmata partum* (the saying of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, probably collected in Gaza in the late fifth century). The lists treat “meditation” as being one of several ascetic practices (Rönnegård, 2013, pp. 79-80).

In the earliest monastic sources repetition is indicated by the use of the verb *meletán* or *meditari*, or the noun *melétē* or *meditatio* in the context of the short prayers.²¹²²

1.4.2 Meditation and Contemplation

The Latin compound *con + templare* can be translated as “be in the temple” or “observe in the temple”. It implies the meaning of silent being with God and “observing” God with one’s soul. In Christian tradition the concept *meditation* is frequently used to indicate the method or disciplined practice, in the sense of a path, but contemplation indicates the destination or the result of the path.²³

However, in common usage today the word “contemplation” has no clear boundaries. Keating is equating contemplation and contemplative prayer as “resting in God”, which is open to all seekers of goodwill.²⁴ Contemplative prayer is perceived as the process of interior purification and transformation.²⁵ According to Keating, it is a prayer in which God’s presence is experienced within oneself, “It is the opening of mind and heart – our whole being – to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words and emotions.”²⁶

Often the word contemplation is used as a synonym to meditation and contemplative prayer. John Main starts a series of talks by saying, “I am using the term meditation as synonymous with contemplation, contemplative prayer, meditative prayer, and so forth.”²⁷

Meditation techniques can be divided into two broad categories: (1) concentrative techniques which involve focusing on breathing and/or specific thoughts. The goal with this type of meditation is to suppress all other thoughts; (2) Awareness²⁸ meditation involves focusing on breathing or a sound/word but also allowing the mind to wander.²⁹

According to Rubenis contemplation denotes a meditation that is not focused on objects.³⁰ This corresponds to Keating’s view that contemplation is non-conceptual forms of meditation.³¹ This type of meditation does not stimulate the imagination; therefore, in the Christian tradition it is sometimes called the “pure prayer” – a prayer purified from all human content.³²

²¹ (Johnsén, 2013, p. 95)

²² Repetition of a particular phrase, prayer or excerpts from Scripture was also typical of the general monastic practice of *melétē* (Johnsén, 2013, p. 95).

²³ (Rohr, 2013a, para. 1; Rubenis, 2008, pp. 13-14).

²⁴ (Larkin, 1999, p. 28)

²⁵ (“The Christian Contemplative Tradition,” n.d., para. 2)

²⁶ (Keating, 2006, p. 1)

²⁷ (Main & Freeman, 1979, p. 10)

²⁸ Insight or non-directive meditation

²⁹ (Cherry, 2014, Study Looks At Brain Activity During Different Types of Meditation section, para. 2; Wilber, 2011, para. 2)

³⁰ (Rubenis, 2008, pp. 13-14)

³¹ (Keating, 2008, p. 3)

³² (Rubenis, 2008, pp. 13-14)

“Christian Meditation” of John Main³³, which the informants in this study practise, is a form of contemplative prayer and a spiritual practice. Spiritual practice/spirituality in this research suggests a personal commitment to a process of inner development and change, as well as search for and discovery of the absolute or the divine.³⁴ Christian Meditation can be referred to as the “pure prayer”, which is not focused on objects; it is an awareness meditation, where facilitating and deepening the relationship with God is central.

1.4.3 Historical Outline of Christian Meditation

The basis for Christian Meditation goes back to the early Christian monks – the Desert Fathers and Mothers in Egypt, Palestine and Syria in the third and fourth century.³⁵ The core of desert spirituality is illustrated by the Greek term *hesychia*, meaning rest, stillness or silence in prayer. It is understood as a “rest in God” through an interior “peace of the heart”. The desert monk John Cassian brought this spirituality to Western Christendom in the fifth century when he moved from Egypt to France and established two monasteries near Marseilles. Cassian instructs on the practice of silent prayer in his significant *Conferences* that is drawn from his interviews of other desert monks.³⁶ Cassian suggests a short phrase (*formula*) from the Psalms 70:1³⁷ as an object of one’s prayer; and he is very clear regarding the need to make the practice constant and ceaseless. In the New Testament the notion of “unceasing prayer” was evidently informed by the apostle Paul in First epistle to the Thessalonians 5:17, where they were encouraged to pray “unceasingly”.³⁸

Later, contemplative prayer was developed into being the norm for clergy and the devout Christians. In the Middle Ages with the rise of Scholasticism in the 13th century and a continuing shift in emphasis from the experiential to intellectual in spirituality, and the suppression of monasteries in many countries in Europe during the Reformation, this tradition became marginalized in Christian theology, suitable for cloistered monks but not for lay people.³⁹

³³ It will be presented more thoroughly in the section to follow

³⁴ (Teasdale, 1999, p. 10; 17)

³⁵ The Desert Fathers including Evagrius, St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great in the West, and Pseudo-Dionysius and the Hesychasts in the East. In the Middle Ages, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, Guigo the Carthusian, St. Hildegard, St. Mechtilde, Meister Eckhart, Ruysbroek and Tauler, the author of *The Imitation of Christ* and the English mystics of the 14th century such as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, and Julian of Norwich represent the Christian contemplative tradition. After the Reformation, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Therese of Lisieux; the French school of spiritual writers, including St. Francis de Sales, St. Jane de Chantal and Cardinal Berulle; the Jesuits, including De Caussade, Lallemont and Surin; the Benedictines, like Dom Augustine Baker and Dom John Chapman, and modern Cistercians such as Dom Vital Lehodey and Thomas Merton, all cultivated contemplative practices (“The Christian Contemplative Tradition,” n.d., para. 3-5).

³⁶ (J. K. Ferguson, 2010, pp. 62-64)

³⁷ O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me (Johnsén, 2013, pp. 95-97)

³⁸ (Johnsén, 2013, pp. 95-97)

³⁹ (J. K. Ferguson, 2010, p. 64)

In the 20th and 21st centuries, various religious orders, particularly the Jesuits and Discalced Carmelites, have taken the lead in reviving the contemplative dimension of their founders and to share their spirituality with lay people. Besides, several monks, such as Fathers Thomas Keating⁴⁰ (1923 –) and John Main (1926–1982), have taken initiative in answering the call of the Second Vatican Council⁴¹ to recover and develop “a contemplative orientation” in the spiritual life of Christians today.⁴² The result of these initiatives is the creation of a great number of modern prayer practices based on historical contemplative teachings.^{43,44}

1.4.4 *Christian Meditation and the Apophatic Tradition*

Contemplative prayer, including “Christian Meditation” of John Main, is an apophatic⁴⁵ (Greek for negative), as opposed to cataphatic (positive) form of prayer within these two streams of Christian theology.⁴⁶ The terminology of “apophatic” and “cataphatic” theologies, in other words, the use of negation (*apophasis*) and affirmation (*kataphasis*) in ways of talking about God, was introduced into Christian theology by the early-sixth-century author who wrote under the pseudonym of the Apostle Paul’s convert, Dionysius the Areopagite^{47, 48}

Cataphatic prayer is referred to as positive because it is everything that can be said about or imagined of God, and is typical of the prayers recited in an open worship like the Sunday service. Apophatic prayer, on the other hand, is a prayer of “no-thinking,” meaning that it is without any sort of images or ideas, acknowledging the ultimate incomprehensibility of God.⁴⁹ However, both cataphatic and apophatic forms of prayer are usually understood as deeply complementary.

1.4.5 *The World Community for Christian Meditation*

In 1975 John Main, a Roman Catholic priest and Benedictine monk, started the first Christian Meditation Centre in London, where the first of many weekly meditation groups began to meet. Main developed a method that is called “Christian Meditation”. In 1991 the

⁴⁰ A Trappist monk (Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance) and priest, known as one of the principal architects and teachers of the Christian contemplative prayer movement – Centering Prayer., and is a founding member and the spiritual guide of Contemplative Outreach.

⁴¹ It took place 1962 – 1965

⁴² (Freeman, 2011, p. 10)

⁴³ Prayer of Faith, Prayer of the Heart, Pure Prayer, Prayer of Simplicity, Prayer of Simple Regard, Active Recollection, Active Quiet, Acquired Contemplation, Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are names of modern practices based on historical practices and intended to prepare their practitioners for contemplation (“The Christian Contemplative Tradition,” n.d., para. 7)

⁴⁴ (“The Christian Contemplative Tradition,” n.d., para. 6)

⁴⁵ It is also called negative theology

⁴⁶ (J. K. Ferguson, 2010, p. 66)

⁴⁷ Generally referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius

⁴⁸ It was only terminology that Dionysius proposed. He did not invent this terminology, but borrowed from the great fifth-century Neoplatonist, Proclus (410 or 412-85) at the Academy at Athens (Louth, 2012, p. 139). The use of negation and affirmation in relation to God had a long history, going back the Hebrew scriptures and classical Greek (Louth, 2012, p. 137).

⁴⁹ (J. K. Ferguson, 2010, p. 66)

World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) was founded.⁵⁰ The Mission Statement of the Community was adopted: *To communicate and nurture meditation as passed on through the teaching of John Main in the Christian tradition in the spirit of serving the unity of all.*⁵¹

The current director of the WCCM is Laurence Freeman (1951 –). Freeman is a monk of the Olivetan Benedictine Congregation of Monte Oliveto Maggiore and a student of John Main.⁵²

The method of Christian Meditation involves the repetition of a single word during the time of meditation. The teaching of John Main of this ancient tradition of prayer is rooted in the Gospels and the early Christian monastic tradition of the Desert.⁵³⁵⁴ The WCCM⁵⁵ carries on John Main's vision of restoring the contemplative dimension to the common life of Christians and engaging in the common ground shared with the secular world and other religions.⁵⁶

WCCM states that meditation is a universal spiritual wisdom and a practice that is found at the core of all the great religious traditions, leading from the mind to the heart.⁵⁷ Sometimes John Main's Christian Meditation is also referred to as the prayer of the heart.⁵⁸ WCCM emphasizes the capacity of meditation that opens up a common ground between all cultures and faiths today. It is the faith that makes meditation Christian; it is the personal connection with Jesus, the historical scriptural and theological tradition in which one meditates. It is also the other means by which the spiritual life is nourished – Scripture, sacraments and worship, which makes it Christian.⁵⁹

According to WCCM, meditation is not a substitute for other forms of prayer. It, on the contrary, revives their meaning. Meditation is a way of simplicity, silence and stillness. Silence means letting go of thoughts. Stillness means letting go of desire. Simplicity means letting go of self-analysis.⁶⁰ Christian Meditation is a practice that goes beyond concepts and terms, and is not a theoretical reasoning.⁶¹

John Main teaches that to meditate you:

⁵⁰ ("About The World Community for Christian Meditation," n.d., para. 1-2)

⁵¹ ("About The World Community for Christian Meditation," n.d., para. 8)

⁵² ("Laurence Freeman OSB," n.d., para. 1-2)

⁵³ (J. K. Ferguson, 2010, p. 61; "What is Christian Meditation?," n.d., para. 1)

⁵⁴ It is in the same tradition as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which is an anonymous work of Christian mysticism written in Middle English in 1375. *Cloud of Unknowing* is a spiritual guide and documents techniques used by the medieval monastic community to build and maintain the contemplative knowledge of God (Farrell, 2013, p. 51)

⁵⁵ The roots of the World Community for Christian Meditation lie in the desert tradition of early Christianity. John Main recovered this way through his study of the teachings of the first Christian monks, the Desert Fathers, and of John Cassian (4th century AD) ("What is Christian Meditation?," n.d., para. 2-3)

⁵⁶ ("What is Christian Meditation?," n.d., para. 2-3)

⁵⁷ ("Christian Meditation: What is Meditation," n.d., para. 1)

⁵⁸ (Freeman, 2011, p. 14)

⁵⁹ ("Christian Meditation: What is Meditation," n.d., para. 1; 8-9)

⁶⁰ ("Christian Meditation: What is Meditation," n.d., para. 6; 9-10)

⁶¹ (Rubenis, 2008, pp. 15-16)

“Sit still with your back straight. Close your eyes. Repeat your mantra interiorly and continuously.”⁶² Main recommends the ancient Christian prayer-word “Maranatha”⁶³. Main instructs to let go of all thoughts, images and other words, “Don’t fight your distractions but let them go by saying your word faithfully, gently and attentively and returning to it immediately that you realize you have stopped saying it or when your attention is wandering.”⁶⁴

1.4.6 *Christian Meditation in Latvia*

The initiator of Christian Meditation in Latvia is Juris Rubenis (1961 –). He was ordained a priest of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia in 1982. Rubenis served as a priest till 2012. He received his doctoral degree in theology in 1992 from the University of Latvia.⁶⁵

Rubenis is author of 20 books and more than 500 publications and co-author of publications in different languages.⁶⁶ For more than 10 years, Rubenis has been working closely with artist and thinker Maris Subacs. In 2004, he was included in the list of the 100 all-time most prominent persons in Latvia. In March 2007, the selected works of Rubenis and Subacs *Finding God in a Tangled World*, published in USA by Paraclete Press, was included in the list of the best spiritual books of 2007 by the e-journal *Spirituality & Practice*. It is the highest recognition acquired by a Latvian writer in the U.S. In 2011 Rubenis graduated from Lassalle Kontemplationsschule Via Integralis in Zurich and was authorized and appointed as a contemplation/meditation teacher by Christian contemplation teachers and Zen masters Pia Gyger and Niklaus Brantschen. In 2009 Rubenis founded the meditation centre “Elijas nams”⁶⁷ in the district of Ventpils in Kurzeme⁶⁸ where he is currently working.⁶⁹

The Community for Christian Meditation in Latvia was established in 2008 and is a part of the Word Community for Christian Meditation. It is a canonically confirmed lay organization of the Catholic Church, which means that before obtaining such status, it was theologically assessed and recognized to be authentic.⁷⁰

⁶² (Freeman, 2011, p. 20)

⁶³ Aramaic word which means “come, O Lord” or “the Lord is coming” used by St. Paul in 1 Cor. 16:22.

⁶⁴ (“Christian Meditation: What is Meditation,” n.d., para. 4-5)

⁶⁵ Rubenis was very actively involved in the dissident movement during the Soviet occupation. He was one of the founders of the Latvian People’s Front in 1988 and one of the first members of the board. Rubenis is also the officer of the Order of the Three Stars (*Triju Zvaigžņu ordenis*) which is the highest state honour in Latvia, and he is the grand officer of The Cross of Recognition for serving Latvia (Rubenis, n.d.)

⁶⁶ Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, Russian, Finnish, Swedish, German, English and Italian languages

⁶⁷ “Bet Eljahu” or “House of Elias” is the first organization of this type in Latvia

⁶⁸ Kurzeme is in the West part of Latvia

⁶⁹ (Rubenis, n.d.)

⁷⁰ (Reča, 2009, p. 4)

At the time being, Christian Meditation is practiced in several towns in Latvia, where meditation groups meet weekly. The Community for Christian Meditation in Latvia brings together people from different denominations, cultural and religious backgrounds and paves the way for Christian unity.⁷¹

Rubenis with his meditation centre “Elijas Nams” became a member of The World Community for Christian Meditation in 2009.

1.5 Research History

I have found no tangible evidence that there has been done any qualitative research project on Christian Meditation in Latvia. However, there has been written a theoretical paper *The World Community for Christian Meditation: Transformation of Biblical Paradigm (phenomenological explication)* by Elizabete Taivane⁷² (2013), where she explicates the transformation of biblical paradigm based on the works of John Main, Laurence Freeman and Juris Rubenis.

Another research project that examines Christian Meditation is a qualitative study: *An Anchor and a Sail: Christian Meditation as the Mechanism for a Pluralist Religious Identity* done by Jonathan Mermis-Cava (2009). This study examines the religious identity of people who practice “Christian Meditation” of John Main.

As far as I know there has not been done any study in Norway concerning the Christian Meditation of John Main. There are a few qualitative research projects conducted in Norway concerning meditation. A study, which is important to mention concerning the topic of the particular thesis, is a master thesis *The art of observing, accepting and letting go: a qualitative study of long-term meditators: exploring the meditative process and its subjective effects on daily life* by Mari Skrede (2006). Skrede explores meditation and its subjective consequences from the viewpoint of six long-term meditators.

A theoretical study was done by Uwe Sander Bongsted at the University of Oslo (2008). In his master thesis *Dialog og dybde: Kontemplativ spiritualitet som religionsteologisk utfordring*⁷³ he explores contemplative spirituality and its place in interreligious dialogue.

“Christian Meditation” of John Main has not been researched extensively.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the two researchers belonging to the World Community for Christian Meditation,

⁷¹ (“Kristīgā Meditācija: Grupas,” n.d.)

⁷² Dr. theol., associate professor of Faculty of Theology of University of Latvia

⁷³ *Dialogue and depth: Contemplative spirituality as a challenge of theology of religion* (my translation)

⁷⁴ There exists more empirical research on the influence of Christian contemplative prayer called Centering Prayer. See (J. K. W. Ferguson, Eleanor W. & Castañeto, 2009) and (Johnson et al., 2009).

Don Boyle and David Cotton, have conducted a study called *Christian Meditation, Mental Health and Well-being* (2011). With the help of a questionnaire with the mix of quantitative and qualitative elements they examined different aspects of meditators' health, wellbeing, use of mantra and the role of one's faith in the practice of Christian Meditation.

As I see it, this study will be a contribution to scantily explored field. Thus, this study has relevance for further research on Christian Meditation and cultural encounters in Latvia.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

After this introductory chapter, Chapter two deals with the methodological aspects of the study. Here I discuss the choice of method, ethical considerations, analytical approach and my role as a researcher. In Chapter three, I present the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study: the concepts of *culture* and *cultural encounter*, the theories of dialogue, of true and false self, and of interreligious learning. Chapters four, five, six and seven constitute the analysis of the study. Chapter four consists of the analysis of the primary motives, which encouraged the informants to start practising Christian Meditation. Chapter five explores the informants' interpretations of their experience of Christian Meditation. Chapter six consists of the analysis of how the informants interpret their experiences of encountering other cultures. Chapter seven investigates the informants' experiences regarding the meaning of Christian Meditation in cultural encounters. Chapter eight provides a concluding summary of the findings and some closing remarks.

2 The Methodological Approach

In this chapter I will describe the methodological choices I have made in order to elucidate the research questions. In order to get insight into the informants' personal experiences connected to Christian Meditation and cultural encounters, a qualitative approach was chosen. A qualitative approach embodies a number of methodological challenges connected to the role of the researcher in the process of analyzing and interpreting a social phenomenon. Moreover, the close contact between the researcher and the persons being studied gives rise to some ethical challenges.¹ In this chapter I will specify and clarify the processes that are involved in qualitative research. I will explain the process of data collection and method for analysis. I will present the informants, reflect upon my role as a researcher, and include a discussion of ethical considerations.

¹ (Thagaard, 2013, pp. 11-14)

2.1 The Qualitative Method in this Research

It is common to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. It is frequently claimed that the qualitative research methods are more subjective than the quantitative. According to Aksel Hagen Tjora, this is a false assertion, because both approaches are primarily interested in the individuals' points of view and the interpretation of results in both approaches depends on theories and perspectives applied by the researcher.² The benefit of a quantitative research is that the statements can be examined by linking them to the demographic variables – gender, age, residence, education etc. and the results can be generalized.³ Whereas in qualitative research it is possible to deepen the understanding of how people interpret their experiences, how they make sense of their world, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.⁴ Qualitative research is inductive, rather than deductive, meaning that it is rather exploring and driven by the empirical data, than theory and hypothesis.⁵

In this research I want to explore how people interpret their experience of Christian Meditation and cultural encounters and how they experience the meaning of Christian Meditation in encountering other cultures. The goal is, thus, not to reveal objective entities or facts, but rather to explore and understand the informants' subjective experiences and meanings. Therefore, a qualitative method is well suited to achieve the goal of this research.

A qualitative method involves a number of methodological approaches. In this study I have chosen to use a qualitative in-depth interview as the main method to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the different phenomena. In-depth interview provides a good basis for gaining insight into people's thoughts, personal histories, experiences and feelings.⁶

This thesis is based on the interpretations of individuals' expressions and their understanding of the meaning of Christian Meditation in their lives and particularly in their cultural encounters. It is important to note that the research is built upon the expressions of the informants only to the extent they decided to reveal themselves. Although it is the researcher who asks the questions, it is always the informant who has the control over what he or she wants to tell.

² (Tjora, 2010, pp. 20-21)

³ (Ibid.)

⁴ (Merriam, 2009, p. 5; 13)

⁵ (Tjora, 2010, p. 16)

⁶ (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005, p. 2; Thagaard, 2013, p. 95)

2.2 Participant Observation

In addition to the interviews, I participated in two Christian Meditation sessions that take place every week at the Lutheran Church of Tornkalns to observe the ways in which meditation sessions are held. By being a participant myself and meditating among other people, I gained a better understanding and sense of what Christian Meditation sessions encompass. It was very useful to have the insight of how they are organized, what elements are used and what kinds of topics are taken up by the pastor leading these sessions. This experience was important for later interview situations, where I could better relate to people who participate regularly in the Christian Meditation sessions at the church. Østbye, Helland, Knapskog, and Larsen argue that by combining interviewing and observing the researcher gets an easier access to the so-called *tacit knowledge*.⁷ This is a kind of practical consciousness that informants take for granted. Also Karin Widerberg argues for using observation as a complement to interviews in order to get the context of the informant.⁸

In later interview situations many informants referred to the meditation sessions, details and quotations of lectures given by the pastor, and many referred to the feeling and setting of meditating together. I experienced that some informants took this knowledge for granted. Therefore, it was crucial to get access to it in order to gain a better understanding of the situational factors of each informant.

2.3 Semi-structured Interview

When preparing for the phase of interviews, I was inspired by the phenomenological approach. According to Steiner Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, a phenomenological approach has been prevalent in qualitative research.⁹ In qualitative researches “‘phenomenology’ is a term that points to an interest in understanding social phenomena from the actors’ own perspectives and describing the world as experienced by the subjects.”¹⁰

I decided to focus the interviews on the meanings the subjects make of their own life experiences. As a tool to achieve that, I chose a semi-structured interview as the method of this project, which “‘attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives.”¹¹

⁷ (Østbye, Helland, Knapskog, & Larsen, 2013, pp. 126-127)

⁸ (Widerberg, 2005, pp. 113-114)

⁹ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27)

¹⁰ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 26)

¹¹ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27)

A semi-structured interview is conducted according to an interview guide that focuses on certain themes and may include suggested questions. The interview is usually transcribed, and the written text and sound recording are the basis for the following analysis of meaning.¹² According to Sharan B. Merriam, the semi-structured interview “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.”¹³ However, specific information is usually desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a more structured section to the interview.¹⁴ This was also the case in this research where the interviews were guided by a list of questions/issues to be explored. Yet, specific information was also gathered from all the participants. The issues were explored briefly following the cues of the informants. I chose this type of interview as it was important for me to be flexible and sensitive to the peculiarities of each informant’s situation.

2.4 Searching for Informants in Latvia

After deciding on the topic of the thesis, I started searching for contacts in Latvia. I had knowledge about Juris Rubenis and the Christian meditation centre “Elijas nams”. According to the homepage of the Community for Christian Meditation in Latvia, there were five other venues apart from “Elijas nams”, where Christian Meditation was practised. In Riga there were two places. The first one was the Riga Luther Church¹⁵ which organized Christian Meditation on Mondays and Saturdays, led by the Lutheran pastor Indulis Paics. These meditation sessions were held in Latvian language. The second one was the Russian-speaking Catholic Association “Terra Mariana” that arranged Christian Meditation on Thursdays. The contact person was Pāvils Ļevuškans and it was held in Russian. The other three places where Christian Meditation was arranged in Latvia were the towns Lielvārde, Bauska, and Nereta. While being in Norway, I sent e-mails to the contact persons of the Community for Christian Meditation in Latvia telling about my research. I got response back; but it turned out to be difficult to get in touch with Christian Meditation practitioners via the internet. When I came to Latvia in autumn 2013, I asked to meet Pastor Indulis Paics in person to present my research. He was very supportive, and after a meditation session on a Monday evening I got a chance to introduce myself and my research to the audience of people who attend Christian Meditation sessions in the Riga Luther Church. I presented the topic and the goals of the research; and I asked people who were interested to participate in the interviews. I also informed them that the interviews were

¹² (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27)

¹³ (Merriam, 2009, p. 90)

¹⁴ (Merriam, 2009, p. 90)

¹⁵ Also called Torņkalna Church

voluntary, confidential and that one could withdraw at any time. I explained how much time the interview would approximately take. This method proved to be successful as enough people were interested to be interviewed and share their experiences. I chose to address people who participated in Christian Meditation in the Riga Luther Church because these sessions were held in Latvian and it was this language I felt most comfortable with. In addition, Christian Meditation sessions were open to everybody, there was no condition that one needed to be a member of the church community, be it Lutheran, or Christian at all. I decided that the Riga Luther Church was a good place to find Christian meditators that corresponded to my sampling strategy as the denomination was not of primary importance to me.

2.5 Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy I used can be described as “convenience sampling”, where a formal request within a particular setting is used to recruit the potential participants.¹⁶ In my case pastor, Indulis Paics, introduced me to the audience of Christian meditators and then gave me the chance to introduce my research to the audience. The prospective participants received the information about the project from me with the permission of the pastor. People, who were willing to participate in the research, gave their contact information to me to be later contacted. The procedure for selecting participants was based on their availability for me as a researcher.

I wanted to interview adults¹⁷ who practised Christian Meditation daily and who had meditated for a longer period of time, so that they would have the possibility to evaluate the impact of Christian Meditation and its meaning in their lives. I decided that a year of experience was sufficient to do that. As the interview process started, I encountered that a half of the informants had experience in other meditation practices, and that the actual experience of meditation in general was longer. One informant had practised Christian Meditation for half a year, but had an extensive experience of other forms of meditation, so I included the interview for the analysis. I interviewed fifteen people in total, but I decided to exclude one of the interviews from the basis for the analysis as it did not meet the criteria for sufficient experience of Christian Meditation.

In addition, I wanted to have an approximately similar number of both sexes to ensure a diverse selection of the informants to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Thus, the sampling was also strategic because the participants

¹⁶ (Thagaard, 2013, p. 61)

¹⁷ Within the definition of adults I include the persons of the age group of 20 years old and above.

represented characteristics and qualifications which were essential to the research questions.¹⁸ Among informants, I interviewed also Pastor Indulis Paics. He agreed to an open interview without being anonymized, which I regard as a great asset to the research.

2.6 Research Limits

It is also necessary to address the limitations of the sampling. When addressing the potential participants I did not have a declared agenda or a particular view on cultural encounters included in the criteria for participating in the research. I searched for participants who practised Christian Meditation and who had some acquaintance with other cultures. I assumed, however, that people who accepted the invitation to participate were already engaged by or involved in cultural encounters in some way because I informed about my research and goals. As I saw later in the interview situations, most people who were willing to participate in the research expressed a personal interest in this topic and had a diverse experience of cultural encounters, including meeting members of other culture/religion and spiritual practices in various non-Christian traditions.

2.7 The Informants

2.7.1 Confidentiality

A specific challenge that I encountered during the interview process was that some people knew each other, and were members of the same church community. It occurred one time that participants had talked to one another about being interviewed. In addition, the fact several informants were active members of the church community made it more possible for people to be recognized. This made me aware of the fact that I had to be very careful in the process of protecting the anonymity of participants. It is common practice to use fictitious names and other changes in subjects' personal data to protect their privacy. This requires changing the form of the information without altering the meaning.¹⁹ In this research I have given the informants fictitious names that are commonly used in Latvia. I have chosen not to include their age, occupation, education, nationality or denomination when I refer to direct quotes. Nevertheless, I have kept in mind that their background influences the way they interpret their experiences. In some parts of the analysis I have chosen not to refer to the

¹⁸ (Thagaard, 2013, pp. 60-61)

¹⁹ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 272)

fictitious names at all to take precaution of not revealing the identity of the informants. However, I cannot ensure completely that none of the participants can be identified.

2.7.2 Background Information of the Informants

In this section I will present the background information of the informants such as the age, education, length of experience, nationality, early relation to Christianity and denomination. I have chosen to present the approximate age and not to link the age to the fictitious names to protect the confidentiality of the informants.

The informants are six women and eight men.

Age:

- A woman and a man in their 20s.
- A woman and three men in their 30s.
- Three men in their 40s.
- Three women and a man in their 50s.
- A woman in her 60s.

Education:

Thirteen informants have higher education. Four informants either have a doctor's degree or are currently studying in a doctoral programme. Five informants have a master's degree or are currently taking master studies. Four informants have bachelor degrees. One informant has a secondary professional education.

Length of Experience

Half of the informants had a previous meditation experience in other spiritual and/or religious traditions. The length of experience of Christian Meditation is as follows:

- One informant nine years
- One informant five years
- Two informants four years
- Six informants three years
- Three informants more than a year
- One informant more than half a year

Ethnic Background

I have chosen not to include the information about the ethnic background and/or nationality of the informants. First, because it could in some cases reveal their identity, second,

the majority of the informants felt that it was important to highlight that they had various ethnic roots and in some cases they could not or did not want to include themselves in only one group.²⁰

Early Relation to Christianity

The interviews showed that 12 out of 14 informants had a very minimal or no relation to Christianity at all in their earlier life, before they started meditating.

One of the reasons that was emphasized by many informants especially the older ones was the state atheism in the Soviet Union with its attitude of denial and action against religion. Even if religion in Latvia played an important role before the Soviet occupation, during the years under the rule of communism religion lost its influence. During the Stalin time believers were persecuted, and many people chose not to talk about or mention religion at home to protect their children. Two informants representing the older generation highlight the meaning of the context of the Soviet time and put it like this, “Even if they [family/parents] knew something about it [Christian tradition], they very deliberately did not pass it on to their children, simply to protect them.” Another informant says:

As a child, my contact with religion was rather minimal since it was the Soviet time, and my parents were afraid to go to church because it affected their work. God forbid, if anybody saw that a managing employee went to church.

This attitude was passed on to the younger generations and shaped the later position towards religion. One informant who is in his/her 20s and grew up in independent Latvia notes, “My family is not really related to the Christian tradition, and it is connected to the Soviet times, when it [Christian tradition/religion] was not a topical matter.”²¹

Denomination

I have chosen not to include accurate information regarding the informants’ denomination as in some cases this information together with other background details could reveal their identity. The sampling is composed of Lutherans, Catholics and Orthodox.

²⁰ The reason for this is largely the historical situation and context of Latvia, which has directly affected the lives of the informants. However, it can also be seen as an effect of meditation, where one of the objectives is to dis-identify with oneself and see that the false self is not a real/substantial entity. The aim is to become aware of the true self, which is the basis of our Selves and is not bound to any country or nation. Basic principles for this theory will be presented in Chapter three.

²¹ The fictitious names are not used here to protect the confidentiality as it can be linked to the age of the informants.

2.8 The Interview Situation

Before every interview, the researcher needs to inform the research participant of the overall purpose of the project and the main features of the design.²² Locations of the interview were agreed and suggested by the participant. These were places where the informants felt relaxed. I asked the informants if they were comfortable with me using the recorder. It did not seem to be a problem as everybody agreed.

A semi-structured interview approach functioned well as I could use the follow-up questions freely to get the informants to explain in detail and nuances what they meant or thought about the particular topic or statement. I was interested in understanding and gaining specific examples and descriptions of the informants' feelings and experiences.

2.9 Transcriptions

Transcribing implies transforming something from one form to another. While the interview is a conversation that develops between two parties, the transcription is frozen in time and loses its context to a great extent. The challenge is to recontextualize the oral speech and to create the room for the oral statements in the written text. In order to do that, Trude A. Fonneland suggests including descriptive and long informant quotes. It is important that the questions from the interviewer are visible in the text; this way the researcher shows the whole context of the informant's reply.²³

The analysis of the meaning had already started while I was transcribing.²⁴ In addition, my notes were helpful to awaken the different interview situations. I have tried to be as accurate as possible in transforming the oral speech to a written text. A few grammatical corrections have been made where it was necessary for the reader to understand the text. I have removed the filler words to avoid banality of the informants' stories. I have done these alterations only to the extent that it did not cause any changes in the meaning of the sentences.

2.10 The Language

Thirteen interviews were conducted in Latvian, which is my mother tongue; and one interview was conducted in Russian, where my skills are sufficient to pose questions and understand the meaning of the answers. There is a great number of studies reporting that the use of the common language by interviewer and participants influences data collection. Some

²² (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 70)

²³ (Fonneland, 2006, pp. 228-230)

²⁴ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 180)

research shows that it shapes the research in a positive way by enabling the participants to make sure that their viewpoints and reflections are fully communicated and understood. However, other studies indicate that the impact of the common language is not always positive. But essentially, the need to communicate the questions and hear and understand the respondent's stories indicates that a shared vocabulary, which the common language entails, is paramount in qualitative research.²⁵ The interview in Russian was more challenging, but thanks to a very understanding informant, I feel that the interview produced very useful knowledge.

Another challenge that needs to be addressed is translating the informants' stories from Latvian to English. Even if the analysis was carried out in Latvian, thus remaining close to the "raw" data, the results are presented in English. Analysis of qualitative data is an iterative and interpretative process where the researcher is "moving between the raw data, assigned categories and classifications." The importance of shared language continues throughout this activity.²⁶ The factors that influence the quality of translation include the linguistic competence of the translator and the translator's knowledge of the culture of people under study.²⁷ Furthermore, the process of translating is largely a work of interpretation, where the role of the researcher is essential. It is important to be aware of the researcher's influence on the translation.

I have chosen to write the thesis in English because it was important for me that the informants could read it and give a feedback.²⁸ The interviews are the material for my analysis and, therefore, it is ethically correct to give the informants a chance to read what is written about them. In addition, many informants expressed their wish to read the final version of the research.

2.11 Ethical Considerations

The researcher has a great ethical responsibility for each informant and the methodological procedures are often closely connected to the ethical considerations that a researcher makes. The qualitative method sets strict requirements for respect of individual's integrity, confidentiality and anonymity. Therefore the participants should always be informed of the researcher's intentions and goals of the project. It is required that the informants give a

²⁵ (Grewal & Ritchie, 2006, p. 65; 73)

²⁶ (Grewal & Ritchie, 2006, p. 77)

²⁷ (Papadopoulos, 2006, p. 89)

²⁸ The alternative, Norwegian, would not be understood in Latvia

voluntary, informed consent to participate. A central element of consent is related to the requirement of securing as complete anonymity as possible.²⁹

Before every interview I explained how confidentiality will be protected, and that I was the only person with access to the interview files. I explained that the interview files will be deleted after analyzing the data, and that the informants will be made anonymous and that the sensitive information will not be included. I explained what kind of information I was interested in receiving. Even if I did not collect personal information like name or address nor did I register or work with names or codes that could link the interviews to the particular informants, I still regarded it as necessary to submit the research for registration and approval to the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD), since the research deals with the topic of religion and spiritual practice.

2.12 My Role as a Researcher

The role of the researcher as a person and the researcher's moral integrity is critical to the quality of the scientific knowledge and the soundness of ethical decisions in qualitative inquiry.³⁰ Carrying out a research and publishing the results equips the researcher with power.³¹ According to Bjørn Ola Tafjord, it is impossible to be "objective" or "neutral" in interaction with other people.³² It is therefore crucial for a researcher to reflect upon the presumptions which have an impact on how the researcher is perceived by the informants and how the researcher perceives the informants and the final report. This reflection on reflexivity in the research process is one of the major methodological requirements in the studies of religion.³³ Tafjord describes reflexivity as a mutual influence which is a part of all forms of interaction.³⁴ Thus, a research interview is an active process where knowledge is produced through a mutual, conversational relationship between interviewer and interviewee.³⁵

2.12.1 My Experience as an Interviewer

In meetings with the informants, the researcher is not merely a student, researcher and academic, the researcher is an instrument on the grounds of everything that he or she is.³⁶ All interaction between people brings in new ideas and major or minor changes for everyone

²⁹ (Fonneland, 2006, p. 237)

³⁰ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 74)

³¹ (Tafjord, 2006, p. 252)

³² (Tafjord, 2006, p. 243)

³³ (Tafjord, 2006, pp. 243-244)

³⁴ (Tafjord, 2006, p. 243)

³⁵ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, pp. 17-18; 54)

³⁶ (Tafjord, 2006, p. 244)

involved.³⁷ There were many situations where the informants would say at the end of the interview, that they had benefited from the interview and that they had understood much more about themselves once they had verbalized their experiences, feelings and meanings. After meeting the different participants of this research I have reflected upon my beliefs and viewpoints.

2.12.2 Closeness and Distance

One of the reasons I chose to conduct the research in Latvia was my acquaintance with the culture and language. Tafjord calls it a “cultural competence”, which is knowledge in the form of language, norms, rules and historical knowledge that community members share.³⁸

During the interview process I felt that the shared context with the informants made it easier to find a common ground. On the other hand, I had to pay attention to the information that I could take for granted.³⁹ Even if the familiar surroundings made it possibly easier to establish contact with the informants, it made me also more aware of my role.

2.12.3 To Study Cultural Encounters

When I chose the topic, I was aware of the fact that the experiences and interpretations of meanings would vary to a great extent, and that the term “cultural encounters” was abstract. However, the primary focus was not on the concept itself, but the elements that characterize cultural encounters and the way they influence the informants. I asked therefore the informants for specific events and experiences regarding cultural encounters. In my opinion, the approach proved to be successful as the abstract concept “cultural encounters” gained a very concrete and specific content. Thagaard highlights the importance of asking specific questions also in situations where the researcher wants to explore topics that have a more abstract meaning.⁴⁰

2.13 Analysis

A qualitative research can be linked to a cyclic model, where the formulation of the research question, data collection, analysis and interpretation overlap each other.⁴¹ A qualitative analysis is sometimes referred to as hermeneutic.⁴² A hermeneutic approach is based on the principle that the meaning can only be understood in light of the context we are studying or which we are a part of. Thus, interpretation is central in hermeneutics. Interpretation of

³⁷ (Tafjord, 2006, p. 257)

³⁸ (Tafjord, 2006, p. 248)

³⁹ (Tafjord, 2006, p. 47)

⁴⁰ (Thagaard, 2013, p. 105)

⁴¹ (Thagaard, 2013, pp. 31-32)

⁴² (Hjerm & Lindgren, 2011, p. 89)

interview texts can be seen as a dialogue between the researcher and text, where the researcher is studying the meaning which the text conveys.⁴³ Researcher's interpretations involve a *double hermeneutic*, because the researcher interprets a reality that is already interpreted by those participating in the same reality.⁴⁴

I have chosen a theme-based analytical approach. It concentrates on the different themes in the textual data, which are the basis for structuring, presenting and analyzing the material.⁴⁵ The process of analysis is composed of reading through textual data, identifying and coding the themes, then interpreting the structure and content of the themes.⁴⁶ The approach has been criticized for not providing a complete perspective because sections of texts are separated from its original context. In order to maintain a comprehensive perspective statements from a single interview are examined in relation to the interview as a whole.⁴⁷

The analysis of the research has been approached inductively, meaning that the starting-point for the analysis has been the empirical data. Informants' understanding and interpretation of their experiences and meanings have been the grounds for my selection of the themes and theories. However, the analysis has also had a deductive character, since in any research we carry with us a pre-understanding that influences our *sensitivity* and direction of attention.⁴⁸

⁴³ (Thagaard, 2013, p. 41)

⁴⁴ (Thagaard, 2013, p. 42)

⁴⁵ (Thagaard, 2013, p. 181)

⁴⁶ (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 13)

⁴⁷ (Thagaard, 2013, p. 181)

⁴⁸ (Tjora, 2010, pp. 25-27)

3 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I will describe the central conceptual and theoretical perspectives that lay the foundation for the analysis, which will be presented in the later chapters.

I have let the empirical data to guide my choice regarding theoretical perspectives. The interview material touches upon great variety of topics. Instead of following one theoretical paradigm, I have chosen to use a combination of several theoretical and conceptual approaches in order to gain a more comprehensive insight into the material.

First, I will explain the use of the concepts of *culture* and *cultural encounter* in this study. I lay stress on theoretical contribution by theorists Thomas Hylland Eriksen¹ (2001), Øyvind Dahl² (2013), and Anita Holm Riis³ (2006). Second, I will present theories of dialogue.⁴ Here I place emphasis on philosophers Martin Buber⁵ (1937/2004), theologians Wayne Teasdale⁶ (2004) and Raimon Panikkar⁷ (1999). After that, I will look at the theory of the true and false self where I emphasize the contribution made by Thomas Merton⁸ (1960), Tomas Keating (1999), Laurence Freeman (2007) and Richard Rohr⁹ (2013; 2011). In addition, I include the theory of interreligious learning by Martin Rötting¹⁰ (2007). Apart from these theoretical positions, I will also include other theoretical inputs throughout the paper. Finally, I conclude by summarizing the key aspects presented in this chapter.

3.1 The Concept of Culture

The concept of *culture* is central in this research. It is therefore important to clarify the usage of it in this study.

It is hard to define culture, because it is in constant change, meaning that the content of the term “culture” changes all the time and is dependent on the context. Both culture and

¹ He is a professor of social anthropology at the University of Oslo (born 6 February 1962).

² He is a professor emeritus of cultural studies (Social and Communication) at the School of Mission and Theology in Stavanger. He earned Dr. Phil. at the University of Oslo in 1993 with a thesis on intercultural communication relating to Madagascar.

³ Anita Holm Riis is Cand.mag. Ph.D. in religion and philosophy. She has taught in philosophy, ethics and science for more than 15 years.

⁴ I will explain the choice and application of the particular concept and theories in the subsection 3.4.

⁵ He was an Austrian-born Israeli Jewish philosopher (1878 – 1965).

⁶ Catholic monk, author, teacher and proponent for interfaith dialogue (1945 –2004)

⁷ He was born in 1918 and died in 2010. He was a Spanish Roman Catholic priest and a proponent of inter-religious dialogue. He has earned doctorate in chemistry, philosophy, theology.

⁸ American Catholic writer, mystic, a Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky (1915-1968).

⁹ Fr. Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest of the New Mexico Province, founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC), a globally recognized ecumenical teacher, contemporary theologian and best-selling author.

¹⁰ PhD in Religious Studies, Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich. OCCURSO, Institute of interreligious und cultural encounter.

religion are second order entities because they are abstract and constructed. The meaning is not independently available without the “secondary”, diverse and context-based discussions around the term.¹¹

It is possible to look at culture from two different perspectives which supplement each other: *descriptive* and *dynamic understanding of culture*.

Descriptive understanding of culture emphasizes that culture is historically rooted, that *tradition* is a substantial part of the culture, and that it is something that we learn in a society. Everything that we have learned manifests itself as cognitive reference frames – “cultural codes in back of the head” – interpretation framework that helps us act the way we do.¹² Looking from this perspective, culture can be defined as the ideas, values, rules, norms, codes and symbols, which a person takes over from the previous generation, and which one attempts to bring forth – although in a slightly modified form – to the next generation.¹³ In the broad sense of a descriptive understanding of culture, it can be defined as everything that is man-made.¹⁴ According to this understanding, religion is included in the concept of culture as a part of it.

Dynamic understanding of culture lays stress on culture as something positioned people apply in situational encounters with other people. Culture is defined as something that is created in a process – in human encounters or in communication with each other. It can flow, change and mix regardless of national and other boundaries, the boundaries are blurred.¹⁵ Thomas Hylland Eriksen offers a definition by stating that culture is what makes communication possible, in other words, that culture is the patterns of thoughts, habits and experiences that people have in common and that makes us understand each other. According to this point of view, culture is created *dynamically* and *continuously*, it changes, and it is focused on the presence and on the possibilities for mutual understanding.¹⁶ Culture becomes an interpretative framework that is connected to each individual. The focus moves from culture as something actually, objectively existent to something that is subjectively and socially constructed in the meeting between people.¹⁷

Both *descriptive* and *dynamic* cultural understandings are complementary to understanding how culture is created, passed on to and defined. To get a more complete picture of cultural processes, both dimensions must be included.¹⁸

¹¹ (Krogseth, 2009, p. 33)

¹² (Dahl, Dybvig, & Keeping, 2013, p. 35)

¹³ (Klausen, 1992, p. 27)

¹⁴ (Herskovits, 1948, p. 17)

¹⁵ (Dahl et al., 2013, p. 40)

¹⁶ (Eriksen, 2001, pp. 60-61)

¹⁷ (Dahl, 2013, p. 41)

¹⁸ (Eriksen, 2001, p. 61)

Culture in this study is behaviour, values, norms, rules, beliefs, ideas, codes, symbols, religions, traditions and institutions through which people perceive the world and their place in it, communicate with each other and structure communal life patterns.¹⁹ However, it is also something that is subjective and in constant change as the cultural elements from our cultural repertoire that we apply in each situation depends on the mutual relationship, positions of power, context and the specific situation.²⁰

3.2 The Concept of Cultural Encounter

Cultural encounters encompass contacts and interactions, whether peaceful or conflicting, between people from different backgrounds.²¹

The Danish philosopher Anita Holm Riis highlights the dynamic understanding of “culture”, where culture is a continuous interaction with the outside world and which focuses on the shared assumptions and ways of life that exist between different human groups. In regard to the concept of *cultural encounter*, the term “culture” is, therefore, less important than the term “encounter” because it is the interaction and the way it changes people, which becomes essential. The attempt to maintain what “culture” is, becomes a snapshot of what a particular group of people identify with in a shorter period, whereas an analysis of the processes and implications that arise when people meet, have a more general nature.²²

However, Eriksen underlines that the importance of culture and cultural differences in meetings between people should not be underestimated.²³ *Culture* is a concept that marks a distinction between different social groups and so helps maintaining a certain distance towards the outside world, which is necessary in order to distinguish ourselves from everything else. A meeting between people is always affected by differences, which we commonly associate with the term “culture”. Cultural encounter is therefore a meeting, where the parties immediately experience the other as markedly different. Cultural encounters can therefore result in conflict, with hardly any desire for mutual understanding.²⁴

Cultural encounter can also be seen as a confrontation between people with different assessments and perspectives. Cultural encounters can either lead to a mutual search for common denominators, thus reducing the differences, or it can lead to a clearer marking of the

¹⁹ (Netland, 2001, p. 328)

²⁰ (Dahl, 2013, pp. 42-43)

²¹ ("Research topic: Cross-cultural encounters," 2013)

²² (Riis, 2006, pp. 13-14)

²³ (Eriksen, 2001, p. 65)

²⁴ (Riis, 2006, pp.12-13)

border between “us” and “them”.²⁵ According to Eriksen, the goal of cultural encounter should be to establish *common cultural denominators*²⁶. Culture in this context is understood as a community of communication²⁷ which deals with establishing a common cultural platform between people with different cultural backgrounds. Community of culture²⁸ is situational and not absolute. There can be different degrees of cultural communities and different degrees of cultural differences between people.²⁹ At the same time, gender, geography, profession, and education have influence on how we can establish this common platform. Social differences can in many situations be more important than cultural differences.³⁰ Cultural encounters require mutual adjustment and learning. They carry with them movement and change.³¹

In regard to the concept of *cultural encounter* in this research, the focus is rather on the term “encounter”. It is the interaction and the way it changes the informants, which are essential in this study. The focus is on how the meeting between people is established.

3.3 Theories of Dialogue

In the analysis I have chosen to explore cultural encounters as dialogical processes and to apply theories of dialogue to illuminate the informants’ experiences of encountering other people with different backgrounds and the informants’ inner transformation arising from such meetings.

According to Riis, dialogue is a crucial condition for a constructive cultural encounter, that is, a cultural encounter where the parties come closer to one another in a mutual understanding.³² Riis says that the term dialogue is applied to express a form for mutual exchange, where openness and responsiveness to the other comes into focus in order to change one’s own position. Dialogue is connected to the willingness of giving up one’s own positions and standpoints.³³ Dialogue encompasses relations rather than being limited to conversation.

For Martin Buber human existence is dialogical, “All real living is meeting.”³⁴ According to Buber, a true dialogue is beyond exchange of words and talk in human interaction.

²⁵ (Ehn & Löfgren, 2002, p. 160)

²⁶ “Kulturelle fellesnevner” in Norwegian

²⁷ “Kommunikasjonsfellesskap” in Norwegian

²⁸ “Kulturfellesskap” in Norwegian

²⁹ (Eriksen, 2001, p. 64)

³⁰ (Dahl, 2013, p. 47)

³¹ (“Research topic: Cross-cultural encounters,” 2013)

³² (Riis, 2006, p. 9)

³³ (Riis, 2006, p. 60)

³⁴ (Buber, 1937/2004, p. 17)

For him the individual really becomes his/her own self in meeting with other people.³⁵ Buber distinguished between two primary attitudes - approaches to existence: I-Thou relationship and I-it relationship. A true dialogue can occur only between I and Thou. The qualities of I-Thou relationship are openness, directness, mutuality, and presence. I-Thou relationship is characterized rather by the differences than by the similarities between people.³⁶ There has to be mutual will to enter this kind of relationship.³⁷ For Buber in every meeting with “Thou” the “Eternal Thou” (God) is present. In I-Thou relationship regard for the other is essential.³⁸ I and Thou meeting is without a formal structure and without specific expectations. This allows for bidirectional communication forming the basis of a personal relationship which transforms both, the “I” and the “Thou”.³⁹

For Buber a genuine dialogue can happen in silence where much is left for monologue. He emphasizes experiencing one another without speaking. Buber stresses that the physical attitude of one to the other is still essential here. Human dialogue can exist without words but it cannot be objectively comprehended. The highest moments of dialogue are the ones where meeting is completed outside its verbal contents. A real dialogue opens to a genuine change from communication to communion.⁴⁰

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas⁴¹ (1906-1995) points out that Buber’s concept of reciprocity is not satisfactory as an ideal. One of Levinas’ major ethical requirements in dialogue is that the Other’s face makes the “I” responsible.⁴² The basis of all human obligations is the total responsibility for the Other. The ethical responsibility of the “I” to respond to the “You” lies on the “I”.⁴³

Panikkar uses the term “dialogical dialogue”, where the dialogue partner is a “real you and not an it”. Panikkar, like Buber, emphasizes the mutual willingness to participate in dialogue.⁴⁴

Panikkar views all people as related to one another in their innermost being. The other person is neither a mere subject nor a mere object, “It is a person who is not my ego, and yet it belongs to my Self. This is what makes communication and communion possible”.⁴⁵ For

³⁵ (Buber, 1937/2004, p. 28)

³⁶ (Rundquist, 1998, p. 210)

³⁷ (Friedman, 1965/2002, pp. xii-xiii)

³⁸ (Herberg, 1961, p. 14)

³⁹ (Buber, 1937/2004, p. 17)

⁴⁰ (Buber, 1947/2002, pp. 5-6).

⁴¹ He was a French philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish ancestry

⁴² (Grung, 2005, p. 89)

⁴³ (Grung, 2010, p. 56)

⁴⁴ (Panikkar, 1999, pp. 30-31)

⁴⁵ (Panikkar, 1999, p. xvi)

Panikkar it is an imperative to know one's own tradition, before entering the dialogue.⁴⁶ Dialogical dialogue is not dialogue for reaching a solution, but is "dialogue for being, since I am not without the other".⁴⁷

Religious meetings with Thou can trigger an internal dialogue which he calls "intrareligious dialogue." This kind of dialogue is itself a religious act – an act that neither unifies nor stifles but re-links us. Intrareligious dialogue occurs in the core of one's being, where one is struggling with oneself, one's beliefs and truths and where one accepts being taught by others.⁴⁸ Intrareligious dialogue is a constitutive element in a human who is connected to other people. This dialogue is helping us to discover the "other" in ourselves.⁴⁹

Dialogue, according to Wayne Teasdale⁵⁰, suggests an attitude of openness to members of other traditions. A high degree of preparation, awareness, and the necessary social skills of listening, patience, deep attention, a spirit of compromise, and an attitude of genuine friendliness are required in interreligious and cultural encounters.⁵¹ The outcome of going into such encounters involves acceptance of the likelihood of being changed by the other.⁵² The essence of interreligious dialogue is the search for and discovery of our common humanity. In other words it means finding and revealing a "deeper, more subtle reality that always unites us."⁵³ Teasdale proposes a contemplative level for engaging one another in interreligious discourse where dialogue is moved forward to a more subtle degree of meaning beyond words. He emphasizes the role of spiritual life/practice in dialogue.⁵⁴

Teasdale elaborates on four forms of dialogue.⁵⁵

The dialogue of the head is the academic level of conversation. This kind of dialogue is concerned with doctrinal differences, beliefs, principles and ethics, and is very important in order to deepen one's understanding and appreciation of other religious traditions.⁵⁶

The dialogue of the heart embraces the affective dimension of human experience. It is connected to reaching out to the Ultimate in spiritual practice, "The dialogue of heart reaches a depth of experience in shared spiritual practices, such as chanting, singing, meditation, silence,

⁴⁶ (Panikkar, 1999, p. xviii)

⁴⁷ (Panikkar & Barr, 1995, p. 102)

⁴⁸ (Panikkar, 1999, pp. xvi-xvii)

⁴⁹ (Panikkar, 1999, p. xix)

⁵⁰ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 5)

⁵¹ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 25)

⁵² (Teasdale, 2004, pp. 6; 25)

⁵³ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 25)

⁵⁴ (Teasdale, 2004, pp. 23-24)

⁵⁵ Teasdale adds also dialogue of love, which "must just happen once the intention is set in motion" (Teasdale, 2004, p. 28).

⁵⁶ ("Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue," 1991, section 42)("Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue," 1991, section 42)Teasdale, 2004, p. 28)

spiritual reading, walking, or a deep kind of meditative listening”.⁵⁷ Sharing common spiritual practices develops profound bonds between participants, and modes of mutual understanding are activated that are frequently not present in more formal and academic settings.⁵⁸ Teasdale explains that a profound awareness of community occurs that makes the participants feel closer together in affection and expectation of their shared efforts.⁵⁹

The dialogue of life is an existential realization of participating in the living reality of human nature. Dialogue of heart is an integral part of this kind of dialogue. The dialogue of life embraces all human experience and all the concerns of human life. It is not simply a conversation about life itself but “existential realization of being together consciously in the process of existence itself.”⁶⁰ It is a profound experience of the depth of being, which manifests itself in the existential situation of human beings where we feel comfort with others in the context of ultimate meaning. The dialogues of heart, life, love and hands deal with belonging in an ultimate way. To sum up, it is the human condition that is the context of this deeply real conversation.⁶¹

Dialogue of the hands is a practical dialogue, which urges people from different cultures and religions to work together on the serious issues and conditions⁶² that we face as a human family.⁶³

3.4 Theory of Interreligious Learning

In order to illuminate the experiences of cultural encounters and the process of one’s transformation arising from such encounters described by the informants, I have chosen to apply Martin Rötting’s (1970 –) theory of interreligious learning. Rötting argues that it can also be applied to cultural encounters.⁶⁴ Interreligious learning is a lifelong religious learning process⁶⁵ each religious person⁶⁶ is embedded in.

According to Rötting,⁶⁷ a learning process is started when one attempts to find a point of contact when meeting other culture or religion. Making the point of contact inevitably

⁵⁷ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 28)

⁵⁸ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 29)

⁵⁹ (Ibid.)

⁶⁰ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 29)

⁶¹ (Ibid.)

⁶² Such as war, the environment, homelessness, justice, education, health care and many others

⁶³ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 30)

⁶⁴ (Rötting, 2007, p. 279)

⁶⁵ Religious learning is regarded as developing a world-view and an identity according to the world-view which is framed by one’s religion or the teaching of one’s particular tradition. Religious praxis is a component of this learning process.

⁶⁶ A religious person, according to Rötting, is someone who is established in one religion and who might apply religious teachings, at least in times of threat (2007, p. 279).

⁶⁷ (Rötting, 2007, p. 280)

changes the view of oneself and the other. The changes in *behaviour* or *thinking* are the indicators of learning where the dialogue partners in interreligious learning recognize the changes of their world-view or their faith. The focus in interreligious learning is on the level of personal learning. In this way, interreligious learning can be understood as the togetherness of inter- and intra-religious dialogue^{68, 69}

The main motive of the model is networking points of contact. The basic movement in any encounter with a different cultural and religious other can be seen as a circle movement: *passing over* and *coming back*, which is an on-going process where a new network of understanding themselves and the other is developed. The natural movement in this encounter intends a balance between the dialogue partners. This balance can be described as “the possibility of becoming friends”. Ram Adhar Mall uses the concept of *overlapping*; and he argues that it is natural to seek an overlapping ground on which we both can stand.⁷⁰

Both movements can be explicated in stages that encompass the process of interreligious learning starting by entering the world of the other: (1) Rooting in one’s own tradition, (2) Awareness of the other religion, (3) A question developing out of this, (4) Opening for deeper exchange, (5) Interreligious dialogue⁷¹ (6) Finding a linking point of contact, a point which can serve as a link between two religious traditions. Coming back into one’s own tradition, the given point of contact will help to (7) double-network the linking point of contact, a link by relating this point to one’s own and the other’s religious world. This will lead to a (8) Transformation, which needs (9) Evaluation before being ready to relate this new perspective to one’s own world, the (10) Intra-religious dialogue prepares for (11) a new rooting in one’s own tradition.⁷²

3.5 The Concepts of False Self and True Self

In order to illuminate the aspect of self-encounter and the understanding of the self in the informants’ meditation experience, I have chosen to include the theory on the concepts of the *false self* (ego)⁷³ and *true self*. The reason why I have done it is because some informants use the concepts themselves and because the representatives⁷⁴ of the contemplative prayer use this theory frequently to describe the process of contemplative prayer.

⁶⁸ The term intra-religious dialogue was introduced by Panikkar as presented in the subsection 3.4.1.

⁶⁹ (Rötting, 2007, p. 280)

⁷⁰ (Mall, 2000, p. 6)

⁷¹ An encounter with a sacred text of the other tradition, seeing a film or listening to a speech. The most intensive form of dialogue is the personal contact.

⁷² (Rötting, 2007, p. 283)

⁷³ The exterior or illusory self, the individual or the empirical ego (Carr, 1988, p. 88)

⁷⁴ Int. al. Laurence Freeman, Juris Rubenis, Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr and Thomas Merton.

For the Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968) the true self is the deepest part of one's being, one's foundation and centre which is united with God. One's true self reflects divine love and grace. The false self⁷⁵, according to Merton, is lacking God's active presence and, as a result, reflects sin, selfishness and darkness.⁷⁶ Merton writes in his 1949 *Seeds of Contemplation*, "Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self... who wants to exist outside the radius of God's will and God's love-outside of reality and outside of life".⁷⁷

It is significant to underline that in the 1950s Merton began a long-term study of Buddhism, focusing upon Zen. The dialogue between the two traditions would thus emphasize points of contact between the Buddhist teaching of *anatta* (no self) and Merton's understanding of the true self.⁷⁸

According to Merton, the core of the spiritual life was to become more deeply centred in our true self where God is found, so that God may develop the true self and take apart the false self.⁷⁹ For Merton, only through realization of the no-self (Buddhism) or dying to one's self (Christianity) a transformation of the false self, one's ego-mind is possible.⁸⁰ It is the paradox of the truth, that in order to find our Selves we must let go of our selves. Further he believed that by finding our True selves, we will find God who resides in us.⁸¹⁸²

Freeman says that meditation is a journey to the centre of one's being, detaching oneself from the false identification with the self. Gradually the meditator starts seeing the self as inner light. In this process of meditation the psychological material rises to the surface. It includes striving with one's dark forces, shadow side of oneself. Freeman says that it is important to allow the psychological material to be integrated,⁸³ "The work of integration means the integration of body and mind, the integration of mind and spirit, the integration of our unconscious and our unconscious selves."⁸⁴ The purpose of the inner work of prayer is to unpress, to release. Integration indicates accepting to go through one's wounds, meeting the shadow side with its painful consequences.⁸⁵ The work of prayer does not mean losing the ego.

⁷⁵ The exterior or illusory self, the individual or the empirical ego (Carr, 1988, p. 88)

⁷⁶ (Sandman, 2000, The Fruits of Centering Prayer section, para. 4)

⁷⁷ (Merton, 1960, p. 22)

⁷⁸ (Altany, 2000, The Woods, the Mountains, the Shrine section, para. 8)

⁷⁹ (Sandman, 2000, The Fruits of Centering Prayer section, para. 4)

⁸⁰ (Altany, 2000, T.D. Suzuki Had Written section, para. 5)

⁸¹ (Merton, 1960, p. 23)

⁸² This is the idea that has been present in the ancient Christian writings of the Church Fathers like Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395) who believed that knowledge of God is found in knowledge of self (see Goosen, 2011, p. 31).

⁸³ (Freeman, 2007b, p. 3)

⁸⁴ (Freeman, 2007b, p. 4)

⁸⁵ (Freeman, 2007b, pp. 3-4)

The ego is not bad in itself, it is a natural stage of a person's development. In the work of prayer one just becomes more aware of ego's activity as one becomes more simple.⁸⁶

According to Freeman, the true self is indefinable. It is self-evident and it cannot become an object of perception. The true self cannot be observed. In other words, it is beyond self-consciousness. It is beyond the normal or familiar activities of the mind by which one objectifies something and analyzes it and labels it.⁸⁷

Thomas Keating describes a false self-system or programme, which starts in childhood when our needs are not met. Children who are prevented from having security, affection and control develop an unconscious drive or compulsion to compensate for these unmet needs. People are led by a drive for happiness in the form of security and survival, power and control, affection and esteem. By trying to satisfy these needs, the false self is re-enforced.⁸⁸ "When we are not thinking, analyzing, or planning and place ourselves in the presence of God in faith, we open ourselves to the contents of the unconscious".⁸⁹ Furthermore, he says that the contemplative prayer is an exercise of letting go of the false self, "a humbling process, because it is the only self we know".⁹⁰

Richard Rohr (1943 –)⁹¹ uses the concept of the true self to express the larger and foundational self that we are in God.⁹² However, the true self is not the perfect self. It merely participates in the One who is.⁹³ Rohr says that there is a capacity, a similarity, and a desire for divine reality inside all humans – *what we seek is what we are*.⁹⁴ Rohr states that the true Self, in its original, pure, primordial state, is wholly or partially identifiable or even identical with God, the Ultimate Reality, which is the ground and origin of all phenomena.⁹⁵

Rohr writes about two parts of life, where the first is preoccupied with the container - order, purity, identity, self-esteem, and self-image, which are necessary to get one moving ahead. The second is concerned with the contents. He emphasizes the importance of having an ego, "You have to have an ego to let go of your ego. You have to have a self to die to yourself."⁹⁶

⁸⁶ (Freeman, 2007a, p. 3)

⁸⁷ (Freeman, 2007a, p. 5)

⁸⁸ (Keating, 1999, pp. 13-16; Sandman, 2000, The Fruits of Centering Prayer section, para. 5)

⁸⁹ (Keating, 1999, p. 19)

⁹⁰ (Keating, 1999, p. 20)

⁹¹ Fr. Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest of the New Mexico Province, founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC), a globally recognized ecumenical teacher, contemporary theologian and best-selling author

⁹² (Rohr, 2011, p. 169)

⁹³ (Rohr, 2013b, p. 55)

⁹⁴ (Rohr, 2013, p. xii)

⁹⁵ (Rohr, 2013, pp. 98-99)

⁹⁶ (Rohr, 2005, p. 25)

Rohr uses a concept of “stumbling stone”, which denotes suffering, failure or humiliation. Only suffering can destabilize the ego (false self) and lead to one’s transformation.⁹⁷

3.6 Summary

The goal of this chapter has been to present the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study. I have discussed the use of the concepts of *culture* and *cultural encounter*. In cultural encounters I have chosen to lay stress on the aspect of “encounter”. Culture in this study is approached from a wider perspective. “Culture” indicates differences, which affect the meeting between people. I have chosen to apply the theories of dialogue to analyze the informants’ experiences of cultural encounters. Dialogue implies mutual exchange and enrichment. I have emphasized Buber, Levinas, Panikkar and Teasdale’s theories of dialogue. In order to understand the aspect of learning and one’s transformation in cultural encounters, I have included Rötting’s theory of interreligious learning. I have incorporated the theory of false and true self to elucidate the informants’ meditation experiences.

⁹⁷ (Rohr, 2005, pp. 25-26)

4 The Path to Christian Meditation

The first research question, which is explored in this chapter, deals with the informants' path to Christian Meditation. I questioned all the informants about their path to Christian Meditation – concerning the reasons for taking up the practice of Christian Meditation. The interviews showed that a large number of factors had been involved on the informants' path to this meditation practice. One of the central motives mentioned by the informants was the search for oneself. The path to Christian Meditation has also involved encounters with different religious traditions. Many informants described a direction towards - or intuitive urge/need for - spirituality that had been running through their whole life, which finally had brought them to this practice or Christianity as such. For many informants it had involved painful experiences, difficulties and crises in life, including spiritual that has brought them to Christian Meditation.

In this chapter I will discuss the main factors and motives, as provided by the informants, which induced them to choose a particular path to Christian Meditation.

4.1 Spiritual Search through Encountering non-Christian Traditions

A significant phenomenon, which emerged during the interviews, was the fact that the majority of informants had some kind of experience connected to other religious tradition besides Christian. Some express it as a theoretical encounter, meaning that some informants were interested in another religious tradition only on a theoretical or philosophical level, while a half of the informants mention being engaged in various spiritual practices in other traditions. For many informants the spiritual search was not attached to one tradition. One of the reasons mentioned by the informants was the lack of connection to Christianity in their childhood/families due to the state atheism in the Soviet time. It implies, perhaps, that there was room in their lives for other traditions in the spiritual search when the Soviet Union collapsed. However, some informants express having Christianity as a phase of the early stage on their search, where they knowingly accepted Christianity and attended the church. However, they drifted apart from the Christian tradition. The main reason for these informants was the lack of personal experience.

Ina, in the beginning of the interview when asked about her religious affiliation, says that the exterior Christian⁹⁸ church has never been important to her. She was involved in many different spiritual practices after getting baptized into Christianity. It was a personal experience

⁹⁸ I do not use the exact denomination to not reveal the identity of the informant

and contact with God that she was looking for in various spiritual practices prior to Christian Meditation:

Ina: I knowingly accepted Christianity, when I got baptized. Yet, I cannot say that I am outwardly religious; I do not go to church on a regular basis.

Alise: The external shape is not so important to you...

Ina: No, I am in a continuous search for God. So I have all along been looking for the depth... a personal experience in different spiritual traditions.

Madara accepted Christianity many years ago, but she did not find answers to her questions in the church. Madara felt that she did not belong there, she felt alone and the pastor as a “middle man” did not really help. Afterwards Madara got engaged in practices, which dealt with individual experience, “I really did not find the answer there; it seemed to me that I did not really belong there. I felt alone among all the rest (...). In my opinion, I do not need somebody in the middle there.” In addition, Madara says that she was looking for silence in the different practices she participated in.

In Ina and Madara’s experience it can be seen that they both were looking for a personal and practical experience in their spiritual search. The exterior form of church did not offer them a sufficient experience on a personal level.

A significant reason for informants to get involved in other spiritual practices prior to Christian Meditation, was the search and need for the spiritual growth. Ina points it out this way:

Ina: I was all the time looking for the depth in the spiritual traditions. (...) Besides my professional development, I am also looking for a way to grow spiritually. You see, the questions relating to the spiritual life of a person, are the most intimate, mysterious, inexpressible. For me the relationship with the Unfathomable⁹⁹ is very essential and important.

Alise: What is this depth that you were looking for in the different traditions?

Ina: It is connected to one’s deepest questions concerning oneself and the mystery of life. It is a search for oneself. It is a search for a meeting with the Mystery... God...

It is significant to pay attention to the word “unfathomable” that Ina chooses to use. It is clearly used in an *apophatic* way, acknowledging that God is beyond all human content. As seen in this quote above, Ina, by being involved in various spiritual practices prior to Christian

⁹⁹ In Latvian “neizdibināmais”, meaning something that cannot be inquired or understood

Meditation, was searching for depth, which I see as a way to deepen and develop a more intimate and personal relationship with God.

Baiba practised meditation in a Buddhist tradition prior to getting baptized into Christianity. She describes her search for spiritual growth as a stage of development on her spiritual path where after securing her material well-being, Baiba started questioning life and spirituality, “Once you have ensured the material status, you start questioning whether there is something more to life, and then you come down to the spiritual matters.” Baiba’s family in her earlier life was not connected to Christianity at all. Baiba explains that she was given a chance to choose her religious path herself, thus for her the spiritual search was not attached to a specific tradition.

4.2 Conflicts on the Path to Christian Meditation

Some informants express a natural and peaceful way of coming into contact with Christianity and Christian Meditation after their practice of meditation in other traditions. Sanita, who has been involved in different forms of meditation on her path to Christian Meditation, expresses that a subsequent contact with Christianity and Christian Meditation came very naturally, “The first contact was with nature, meditation in nature, release and relaxation, then later through [meditation forms in] healing and other forms of meditation. Then I became actively involved in the church, the encounter with it [Christian Meditation] came so naturally.”

However, the majority of the informants view their encounter with other meditation traditions as a conflict on their spiritual search.

Early in the interview with Baiba, when I ask about the motivation of Christian Meditation, she talks about experiencing a conflict with Buddhist meditation practice and philosophy, “But at one point I came to the conclusion that it [Buddhist meditation/philosophy] really was not suitable for people in the Western culture because we live in a different flow of life and values. Our rhythm of life is much, much faster.” After the encounter with Buddhism, Baiba describes a long and profound search for the Christian denomination which suited her beliefs and perceptions.

Arturs had been interested in meditation for a very long time prior to Christian Meditation. He belonged to the Christian tradition¹⁰⁰, at the same time he practised Buddhist meditation. However, it was not possible for him to have regular meetings and contact with the

¹⁰⁰ I do not use the specific denomination to protect the identity of the informant

Buddhist community. So, Arturs' private lessons had not "brought" him anywhere, as he expresses it. Moreover, Arturs describes the encounter with the Buddhist tradition as a collision. He was in need of a practical instrument to link his Christian belief with his practical experience of Buddhist meditation. Christian Meditation provided him with this possibility:

I did not know how I could combine my experience of meditation with my Christian faith. It means that I did not have an instrument to connect them. At the same time, I have always been interested in Eastern spirituality and religiosity... It was rather a collision.

Ina mentions being engaged in several Buddhist meditation practices and practising yoga for several years. However, it can also be interpreted as a conflict, "At that time it was very hard for me to be inside some other tradition, and then I realized how deep-rooted Christianity is within me."

Another significant aspect is the conflict with the Christian tradition that some informants describe. Since the tradition of Christian Meditation was not so well-known in Latvia prior to Juris Rubenis and his contribution to popularizing this practice, it was a great surprise for many informants that a contemplative spiritual practice was also available in Christianity.

Madara describes her encounter with Christian Meditation as a moment of shock, because in her perception Christianity had abolished meditation. She describes approaching meditation through other traditions:

I was approaching meditation through Esoterism, yoga, Qi gong, you can say through different cultures. (...) But I happened to come to Juris Rubenis, and he surprised me by saying that not only all cultures, but all religions are united. Until then, it seemed to me that Christianity had denied everything else. I reviewed my attitude towards Christianity while being in the meditation centre "Elijas nams".

Various spiritual practices have become popular in the West, where many of them have roots in the East. It can also be seen in the informants' experiences where they describe being engaged in different non-Christian spiritual practices prior to Christian Meditation. It was a need for a personal and practical spiritual experience/practice and a need to grow spiritually. As the informants did not know about the existence of meditation in Christian tradition, they got involved in meditation practices in other traditions. For many informants the starting point for their search was Christianity, but the church did not satisfy their need for the dimension of

the personal experience. However, most of the informants experienced a conflict or could not fully include the elements or values of the non-Christian meditation practices in their lives.

The Dalai Lama cautions, “In the West, I do not think it advisable to follow Buddhism. Changing religions is not like changing professions. Excitement lessens over the years, and soon you are not excited, and then where are you? Homeless inside yourself.”¹⁰¹

In other words, there is a possibility that Westerners while being reluctant to fully accept the Eastern way of Buddhism, end up withdrawing from the Western tradition, and thus end up homeless within themselves. Possibly, a similar discrepancy can also be seen in the informants’ experiences, and Christian Meditation is a way to “come home”.

4.3 The Content of Christian Meditation as Encouragement

Many informants emphasized the content of Christian Meditation as a factor that influenced their decision to engage in this practice.

Madara, when talking about her path to Christian Meditation, mentions Juris Rubenis and his personality as an important factor.¹⁰² However, she gives a twofold impression by making much room to the Christian content. Madara states that it was also Christianity, which provides her with a sense of profoundness and calmness:

Christianity... I think it gives the profoundness. Eastern religions, which we now are taking over, confuse me a little bit, it is not ours. The presence of Christianity calms me down; it’s not a sect, which has moved away from the foundations.

Rudolfs emphasizes the Christian/Western content in his encounter with Christian Meditation:

It was previously popular to look at the East - Buddhism, Hinduism, Ayurveda. I realized that I don’t have to look so far. The values expressed in a comprehensible language are right here, I mean, in a comprehensible form of expression, in fact, much clearer and more acceptable and not in conflict with those in other cultures.

The important role of Christianity in the practice of Christian Meditation among the informants can be seen in light of the findings of the research *Christian Meditation, Mental*

¹⁰¹ (French, 2003, p. 27)

¹⁰² I will return to the role of Juris Rubenis on the informants’ path to Christian Meditation in a separate section.

Health and Wellbeing (2011) by Boyle and Cotton where they found out that more than 70 percent of all the respondents¹⁰³ answered that Christianity was very important in their practice.

The importance of the Christian content in the informants' experiences can be linked to Christian Meditation as "coming home", as argued in the previous section. The Dalai Lama has also stated that "conversion usually led to confusion, and that without the support of the prevailing culture, it was hard to maintain your spiritual practice."¹⁰⁴ The supportive link between one's culture and spiritual practice has been crucial in the informants' experiences of starting the practice of Christian Meditation.

However, the views expressed by Uldis and Oskars differ from the opinions illustrated above. For them it was rather the form of Christian Meditation than the Christian content, which influenced their choice of starting this meditation practice.

Uldis highlights the aspect of his subjective and personal feeling of God, which conforms to the form of Christian Meditation. He expresses that the form of Christian Meditation is comprehensive and organic, thus, corresponding to his own feeling of God:

Uldis: It is a comprehensive method to pray, it is not exalted and in loud voices. It is calm and quiet. It is consistent with my sense of God, so it seems to me as a very understandable form. It is possibly the most understandable and organic form.

Alise: What do you mean by organic?

Uldis: I don't pretend to be somebody; I do not try to achieve anything by practicing. (...) Meditation is in the sense organic, that it does not require me to do anything, if I may say so. It is active at the same time open and receiving.

For Oskars it was also the form of Christian Meditation that seemed appealing to him. He mentions during the interview that he felt that the silent meditation is right for him in his spiritual search. Furthermore, Oskars draws parallels to Buddhist meditation, which he is also involved in, and says that he cannot separate both traditions. As I interpret it, Oskars sees Christian Meditation and Theravada Buddhism meditation as different paths to the same source, "the truth is one; the order is one." Oskars does not wish to emphasize the content of meditation:

I have accepted the mantra *Maranatha* that is recommended by Christians (...) but it is just a mantra. Buddhists say the same. They had another option, one of them was repeating the mantra *Buddho*; but they said if you like something else, then use something else and the Christians say the same thing.

¹⁰³ Both the ones who experienced Mental Health problems and had taken medication, the ones that experienced Mental Health problems but had not taken medication and those who had never experienced Mental Health problems.

¹⁰⁴ (French, 2003, p. 27)

4.4 The Need for Finding Oneself as a Stimulus

The search for oneself – the need for gaining self-insight and a deeper understanding of oneself – is a central aspect in the informants’ path to Christian Meditation.

Andrejs emphasizes the need for finding oneself as the central element in his spiritual search, “In reality, religions do not matter; there is a need or wish of finding oneself.” As I understand it, he means that it does not matter which religion one belongs to, but finding oneself is of significance. Sanita states also that the motive for getting engaged in Christian Meditation was the need for finding a path to herself. Ilva mentions as well the need for “bringing order into oneself” and “collecting oneself”. Furthermore, she says that her interest in meditation started when she realized how much more she had to work on herself and her ego, “Only when you realize that you still need to develop very much in yourself and how much you need to cope with yourself and your ego, then the interest [for Christian Meditation] emerges.”

It is apparent that the need for self-encounter is crucial on the informants’ paths to Christian Meditation. Rubenis writes that the greatest conflicts in our public life and relationships happen because we are in conflict with ourselves and we do not know ourselves. It is, according to him, easier to ask the question “Who am I?” than to find an answer to it. Rubenis states that Christian Meditation is a way how to step by step come closer to the centre of one’s being, realizing that getting to know oneself and “getting to know” God is an inseparable process.¹⁰⁵ Thus, self-encounter is the fundamental aspect in Christian Meditation, which cannot be separated from coming closer to God.

4.5 Search for Peace as a Motive

Another central aspect in motivation of informants to start practising Christian Meditation was the search for peace and silence. For Anna the first impulse was curiosity, however, a deeper stimulus – a need for peace – was present:

I think it was curiosity... And I was in great stress, I had to study really much and work at the same time; I just felt that the meditation on Tuesday evenings when I go to the church, that those moments give me peace. So, the first impulse was curiosity, and then I had a wish to calm down, to balance the crazy and effervescent¹⁰⁶ race of life.

¹⁰⁵ (Rubenis, 2008, pp. 8-9)

¹⁰⁶ In Latvian “mutuļojošs”, meaning in constant motion, seething, bubbling

Baiba describes also the need for finding peace and silence, “Meditation is relevant today because the present age is very noisy, stressful and fast. In fact, everybody is longing for silence. That [Christian Meditation] is one way to stop.”

Ilva stresses the turbulent time we are living in, “We all live in a very, very great turbulence. Everybody should think about finding the moment of stopping and getting peace of mind”. Moreover, the peace is essential for her in meeting and understanding herself, “You realize how much you need the balance, peace and silence. Peace is necessary to meet and understand oneself. And when you have gained an insight into how it feels to be peaceful, then that necessity [for peace] can afterwards be felt.”

Sanita emphasizes that the initial stimulus was the search for harmony of life; it was the need for freeing herself from inner stress. Furthermore, she stresses, like Ilva, that harmony and peace are necessary on the path to self-encounter.

As it can be seen in this section, the need and search for inner peace and silence in the informants’ lives have been significant stimuli to start practising Christian Meditation. The search for peace and silence in the informants’ lives conform to the search for themselves. Silence, the moment of stopping and peace are important elements of self-encounter. Rubenis writes that the rush of the daily life, shallowness and spiritual emptiness not only increase the experience of despair and pointlessness, but also alienate people increasingly from themselves. Meditation, according to him, can help not only get to know oneself more deeply, but also find a new way of living in the world, where meditation helps finding a profound peace within oneself.¹⁰⁷ In Chapter five, I discuss that gaining peace is also a central effect of Christian Meditation in the informants’ experiences.

4.6 Crisis/Difficulties in Life as a Motive

During the interviews I noticed that the central aspect in the informants’ lives that brought them to Christian Meditation was difficulties or a crisis in their lives. The informants described painful and emotionally hard events or time of life. For some it was also connected to economic hardships.

Many informants emphasize the need to experience some kind of crisis or suffering in order to turn to a spiritual path/practice and look for ways to develop oneself. This aspect can be seen in Uldis’ experience, where he stresses the need to “fall” or experience some sort of difficulties in order to change one’s life and come to a spiritual practice, “If you live a normal

¹⁰⁷ (Rubenis, 2008, p. 8)

life and you are okay, why would you change anything in your life?” Ilva, like Uldis, places emphasis on the need to experience problems in order to change and improve oneself. For Ilva hardships and problems were significant motives to look for a solution:

The reflection on what it would take to improve the quality of life comes¹⁰⁸ to you when you are experiencing problems. (...) Because when a person is very happy, then it seems that everything is extremely well. Then that person does not look for any solutions or the ways to improve him- or herself.

The difficulties and the need for dealing with them, brought both of these informants to Christian Meditation, which Uldis calls a method at first, but then corrects himself and says “path”, which implies, in my view, that it is not simply a technique for him but a way of life, “Often it is like that with turning to spiritual matters, something must happen. (...) Then you start asking questions, next you start looking for a method, no... a path. Some come to meditation.”

A significant element for many informants was the need to get answers to why it was happening to them, why they were experiencing difficulties or pain. It was the need to get clarity and explanation.

In the following section I will look closer at the experience of “The Dark Night” in two of the informants’ lives. I will not use the fictitious names due to the sensitive experience and the ethical considerations. In addition I will discuss a central aspect of the need for an answer in times of difficulties that was mentioned by the informants. In order to protect the identities of the informants, I will not elaborate on the details of the difficult or painful situations/experiences which the informants revealed during the interviews apart from the experience of “The Dark Night”.

4.6.1 “The Dark Night”

“The Dark Night” is a central aspect in two of the informants’ lives. They use the term themselves to describe their state and situation, but it has been a spiritual teacher or several teachers who have diagnosed their state. It is important to enquire into the experience of “The Dark Night” as it is a significant experience in the spiritual journey in the Christian mystic tradition. The term “dark night” is associated with a poem called *The Dark Night* written by a Spanish Carmelite monk and mystic Saint John of the Cross (1543–1591), and a treatise he

¹⁰⁸ It can also be translated as “arrives” or “one attains or gains the reflection”.

wrote later, commenting on the poem. John of the Cross speaks of the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the spirit, which is often referred to as “The Dark Night of the Soul”.¹⁰⁹

The three related areas of John’s teachings were one. The unity of them he called the “dark night”. The three were: renouncement of desire, renouncement of extraordinary experiences, and renouncement of conceptual knowledge of God. The first concerns asceticism, the second concerns turning away “from genuine visions, revelations, raptures, locutions, and so on in order to rest in ‘pure faith’, which is the only proximate means of union with God”.¹¹⁰ Third is related to the apophatic tradition in Christianity, where God is totally beyond human understanding.¹¹¹

John wishes to help people come to a deep experience of the reality of God through love. He says that we need to go through a purification of our sensual and spiritual appetites to be open to God alone in love. We need to let go of our wish for satisfying spiritual experiences, as well as “comfortable” visions of what God is like. This process is a purification of faith. Anything that we believe about God is always insufficient and limited; in this sense our faith is obscure. The life of prayer needs to come to a state where the concepts and perceptions are emptied out, to be filled with in-rushing power of God, which John calls the “living flame of love”. John uses terms such as “nothingness” that brings with it plenitude, “nakedness” that brings with it new clothing and “forgetfulness” that comes carrying with it an awakening.¹¹² There is a “dark night through which the soul passes in order to attain to the Divine light of the perfect union of the love of God.”¹¹³

Later the term “dark night” became an expression to describe certain phases in spiritual life and transition from one stage of life to another:

It is used as a metaphor to describe the experience of loneliness and desolation in one’s life associated with a crisis of faith or with profound spiritual concerns about the relationship with God. These painful periods of setback and disillusionment, of spiritual torment and anguish have an inherent aspect of spiritual growth.¹¹⁴

Both informants describe the experience of losing the foundation of life, as well as the values that one strongly held on to. One informant says:

¹⁰⁹ (Cunningham, 2001, p. 33)

¹¹⁰ (Merton, 1951, p. 250; cited in Tam, 2002, p. 106)

¹¹¹ (Tam, 2002, p. 106)

¹¹² (Cunningham, 2001, p. 33)

¹¹³ (John of the Cross, 2014, Prologue, para. 1)

¹¹⁴ (Durà-Vila & Dein, 2009, p. 544)

The first questions when you bump against the reality: have you lost relationships, have you lost work, have you lost the status or anything to which you very firmly hang on to at the first stage of life... my egoism which I held to (...) You think you have it all, but suddenly everything comes to an end.

For both informants it is the experience of detaching from their false selves, as I interpret it. One informant describes it as losing his egoism, while the other informant describes it, “I had a feeling that I was struck by lightning and I burnt down”. Merton writes that “In order to become myself I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be, and in order to find myself I must go out of myself, and in order to live I must die.”¹¹⁵ They both describe that their lives were set with values that at that point they thought were meaningful. They had a clear prospect and view on life and God and how the life should be, and then suddenly they experienced losing these former points of view and their *old* life to great extent. One informant expresses it as follows, “All reference-points, foundation and pillars of my life collapsed”; whereas the other informant says that his/her “world collapsed (...) all worldview broke down.” Both informants describe experiencing loss of relationships and jobs. One informant expresses losing God and experiencing nothingness, “I realized that there is no God, there is completely nothing at all. There is just nothingness. It was so terrifying, so unbearable.” Keating says that “in the dark night people sometimes feel that they have lost their faith in God because everything has disintegrated that supported them.”¹¹⁶ One informant describes an experience of silence, where all the words spoken or read seemed meaningless. For the other person it was experience of darkness where “the light switched off”.

One informant describes a severe depression for a period of time and doubt about the mental health in the experience of the dark night. The other informant speaks of it as a grace of God, that he/she did not experience some mental health issues since the “red line is reached very fast”, in other words, that it is not hard for human beings to come to the point where one develops a mental illness in hard times of life.

However, both informants started searching for a way through this painful time and both found their path to Christian Meditation. One informant says, “I had to start my life anew. All my old life collapsed¹¹⁷.” It is also interesting that both informants describe the intuitive quest or intuitive path to Christian Meditation. The feeling of a greater God’s plan for their life is present in both informants’ stories. It is trust in God even when one faces difficult times, “I

¹¹⁵ (Merton, 1960, p. 32)

¹¹⁶ Keating, 2010, para. 60

¹¹⁷ It could also be translated as broke down or crashed down

started praying to God to give me some sign where to go” or as the other informant expresses it, “God sets up everything in his own timing”. This corresponds with Keating who says that

it is the experience of nothingness, the sense of having nothing to stand on, nothing to depend on—even God—while having boundless confidence that this is another side of God, that we need to go through this in order to learn.¹¹⁸

Both informants highlight meeting Juris Rubenis as a significant help in the experience of the dark night.

The two informants describe losing oneself and God, losing relationships, losing their previous lives and conceptions of what they thought they were. The way to transformation goes through becoming aware of human weakness and limitation, through purification of one’s sensual, spiritual appetites and purification of faith, as John of the Cross writes.¹¹⁹ However, the dark night is not experienced as a phase in the spiritual life. It is rather “a symbol of the entire process of movement towards God.”¹²⁰ As witnessed in both interviews, it is a painful process, which Keating describes as “death or worse than death”.¹²¹

4.6.2 *The Need for an Answer*

A central element in experiencing the difficulties and crisis that the informants describe is the need for gaining answers and some explanation of the difficult situation they find themselves in. Many in this search for clarity came to Christian Meditation.

Andrejs, when describing his difficult situation, expresses, “I didn’t find any answers to why it happened to me.” Janis says similarly about his difficult experience, “The first great and inexhaustible question was why. Why me, what remains now and why it happened at all. Everything seemed as if it was okay.” Madara mentions also looking for answers to questions connected to her experience of suffering, “Afterwards I faced suffering in my life... then you are looking for answers to your questions.”

The need to have the “stumbling stone” and experience suffering in order to come to a spiritual practice corresponds with Rohr, who emphasizes the role of suffering in order to transform.¹²² According to him, it is only suffering that can destabilize the ego (false self), which is necessary to come to the true self. Loss of job, death of someone close or unjust death, major humiliation, moral failure is the experiences that can destabilize the ego. Rohr says that in many

¹¹⁸ (Keating, 2010, para. 54)

¹¹⁹ (Cunningham, 2001, p. 33)

¹²⁰ (Leech, 2001, p. 155)

¹²¹ Keating, 2010, para. 60

¹²² (Rohr, 2005, p. 25)

cases people identify themselves with their work or the public persona: the false self.¹²³ In addition, Keating points out similarly that “God approaches us from many different perspectives: illness, misfortune, bankruptcy, divorce proceedings, rejection, inner trials. God has not promised to take away our trials, but to help us to change our attitudes toward them.”¹²⁴ The majority of the informants describe experiencing difficulties, hardships, crisis, loss of job or suffering on their paths to Christian Meditation. The experiences are different, but “we all go through the same kind of transformation. For all of us, there has to be this radical letting go”, as Freeman says.¹²⁵ Merton writes that

a personal crisis is creative and salutary if one can accept the conflict and restore unity on a higher level, incorporating the opposed elements in a higher unity. One thus becomes a more complete, a more developed person, capable of wider understanding, empathy, and love for others, etc.¹²⁶

Turning to this practice has for many been a way to find answers, make sense of their suffering and see the world in a more profound way, as one informant puts it, “I have lost a fortune, but perhaps I am the happiest person, because only this event triggered me to arrive to where I am going now; and I am just happy about this situation.”

4.7 Intuitive Path to Christian Meditation

A central phenomenon, which is present in the majority of the informants’ stories, is an intuitive or unconscious quest for and path towards the Christian tradition and Christian Meditation. Many informants have difficulties to verbalize this quest. They use such expressions as “inner feeling” or “inner sense”¹²⁷, “inner need”¹²⁸ and “intuitive feeling”¹²⁹ that have brought them to Christianity and Christian Meditation. Many informants express also an inner trust in God and experiencing a presence of God of which the informants have not been aware of while being on their path to Christian Meditation. These elements have played an important role in the informants’ experiences.

Anna describes a presence of God which she was unaware of on her path to Christian Meditation. Prior to practising Christian Meditation, she wanted to get confirmed in order to get married in a church. However, Anna rarely went to church. When I ask Anna about her path

¹²³ (Ibid., p. 26)

¹²⁴ Keating, 1999, p. 21

¹²⁵ (Freeman, 2013b, p. 10)

¹²⁶ (Merton, 1968, p. 209)

¹²⁷ “Iekšēja sajūta” in Latvian

¹²⁸ “Iekšēja vajadzība” in Latvian

¹²⁹ “Intuitīva sajūta” in Latvian

to Christianity and Christian Meditation, she describes her path as full of difficulties, and that God helped her get through them. She says that her life could have been in darker colours by now after everything she went through, “God turns everything around. And when I said ‘Yes’ to God on my confirmation day, He has led me through all the difficulties the following years; He has carried me in his arms. I just didn’t realize it.”

Oskars had also an inner feeling and need to get his children baptized. After this, he went to church regularly, but then after some time Oskars left it. However, his spiritual search did not stop. Oskars describes having an inner feeling, which was present in his search for spirituality, “In some training at work, I was asked about what I wanted to learn, and I replied - to meditate. I didn’t have any experience of that yet. It is bizarre, that I somehow came to it.”

Also Ina describes having an inner feeling of the presence of God, “I have always had a sense that something was close to me and that I was never alone. God was next to me. And I learned to lean on this experience.” She mentions also that she has practised meditation intuitively without being aware of it, “I’ve always been on a spiritual quest, even when there was no available information about it. In my teenage years I was intuitively practicing something similar to meditation.”

Janis mentions the intuitive need and search for Christianity and Christian Meditation many times during the interview. For him it was one of the most important factors that played the role of bringing him to the Christian tradition. It was an intuitive feeling that has always been present that he cannot explain. It was an unperceived presence of God that Janis mentions on his way to Christian Meditation. After happening to be in church in his youth not for religious reasons, he says, “If you look at it from the viewpoint of Higher Power¹³⁰, then you are gently introduced to the idea, which will be useful to you in twenty years. (...) The Higher Power delivers everything elegantly.” When he later experienced crisis in his life, Janis felt that he had to go to church; God had already introduced him to the idea, “You are just given a flavour, and it has intuitively proceeded all the time... when I analyze it now.”

St. Augustine said in his prayer at the beginning of his autobiographical Confessions, “You (O God) have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹³¹ According to Rohr, there is a capacity, a similarity, and a desire for divine reality inside all humans – *what we seek is what we are*.¹³²

¹³⁰ He uses the word “Higher Power” alongside the word “God”

¹³¹ (Ryan 1960, p. 43 as cited in (Teasdale, 1999, pp. 18-19)

¹³² (Rohr, 2013, p. xii)

4.8 The Significance of Juris Rubenis

A common element in all informants' experiences is the influence of Juris Rubenis in the initial period of their path to Christian Meditation. This is connected to the fact that Juris Rubenis is a pioneer in promoting Christian Meditation in Latvia. Juris Rubenis served in the Torņkalna Church and started Christian Meditation sessions there. Some informants learned about Christian Meditation in the Torņkalna Church or got to know about it personally from Juris Rubenis. One informant learned about Christian Meditation through meditation group that organized Christian Meditation evenings in another church, which was also connected to Rubenis. Some informants first encountered Christian Meditation through his book *Introduction to Christian Meditation* (2008). Others encountered this practice for the first time in Rubenis' meditation centre "Elijas nams".

Many informants mention Rubenis as a significant person on their spiritual path. Some informants call him their spiritual guide. Ilva says, "Yes, the initiator is a particular person and it probably is a classic case. Every meditator needs essentially someone who introduces him to the practice and guides on this path. For me it was Juris Rubenis."

Many informants during the interviews refer to Rubenis' books or his lectures. It shows how great a role Rubenis plays in informants' spiritual path, and in interpreting and understanding their experience. It is important to note the personal experience and example of Rubenis as great encouragement in motivation to start practising Christian Meditation. Many informants mention Juris Rubenis' ability to reach people in an easy and comprehensible way both the ones who are religious and those who are not closely related to religion. Baiba expresses it as follows:

I have to agree that Juris Rubenis as a spiritual leader has a very strong personality. He is able to reach even those who are not closely connected to religious questions (...) It is the role of personality that is of great significance. It cannot be denied that there are people because of whom you will just try it [meditation].

An important aspect that is mentioned by the informants is Rubenis' ability to define and describe the particular situation or stage of the spiritual path and help with a clear advice. Janis says, "Juris Rubenis is a very strong authority, who is able to define the particular situation where you find yourself." He says further:

And then, through his own example, he reaches to others. He is able to describe what he is experiencing and comprehensibly explain that. (...) Because I can see how he goes through his own struggles and copes

with them, because I see how he does it, I want to do it in the same way. This is how authority works in people's lives. I want to do it in the same way, because he is an authority.

Defining and clarifying the situation has been crucial to two informants who talk about their experience of “the dark night”. It has been important in understanding what they were going through and what to do next.

Another important element in the informants’ experiences is the Christian Meditation retreats led by Rubenis, which takes place in the meditation centre “Elijas nams”. Retreats have been an important part at the early stage of Christian Meditation and also on the further spiritual path. Ten informants mention retreats at “Elijas nams” as an important element of their experience.

Retreats in many informants’ experiences have served as an accelerator for self-encounter and the awareness of their unconscious motivations, thoughts and emotions. For some, it has been an important support on their spiritual path. Janis called the experience of being in “Elijas nams” as an “injection” after which he intensively began to practice Meditation. Both Janis and Uldis talk about coming in contact with Christian Meditation after participating in the retreat, meaning, as I understand it, that the retreat was a great impulse in further practice, in understanding and learning the method to meditate. Uldis says, “You sit there for three days and meditate; and then you really find the feeling. Three days is pretty short, but you start feeling the taste.”

Juris Rubenis has played a major role in the informants’ initial period of Christian Meditation. His personality, own example and spiritual guidance are the key elements mentioned by the informants. Keating attaches great importance to having guidance in a practice of contemplative prayer.¹³³

4.9 Summary

In this chapter I have touched upon the central motivations that induced the informants to get involved in Christian Meditation. There have been many factors in the informants’ lives which influenced their path to Christian Meditation. The majority of the informants had been involved in meditation practices in non-Christian traditions prior to Christian Meditation. These encounters were mostly experienced as a conflict. The informants emphasize the content of Christian Meditation as an important factor, which allowed them to combine their need for personal experience with a Christian content. I argue that Christian Meditation is a way for the

¹³³ (Keating, 1999, p. 19)

informants to come home. The central motivation, which the informants express, is the wish to find themselves and gain a more profound understanding of themselves. For most informants there was a “stumbling stone” - suffering, crisis, difficulties and a need to gain an answer to their suffering involved on their path to Christian Meditation. They express having an inner or intuitive feeling which guided them to Christianity and/or Christian Meditation. Finally, the majority mention Juris Rubenis as a significant factor on their path to this meditation practice.

5 Christian Meditation in the Informants' Lives

I asked all the informants what Christian Meditation meant to them and how it affected their attitude towards themselves and to others. In this chapter I will focus on the different elements that the informants highlighted as significant regarding their experience of Christian Meditation.

5.1 Christian Meditation as a Path to Oneself

The central theme, mentioned by the informants, is the experience of Christian Meditation as a path to oneself. It is a way of getting to know oneself, accepting and embracing oneself. As we saw in the previous chapter one of the central stimuli that led the informants to Christian Meditation and other spiritual practices was their wish for finding themselves and gaining a better understanding of who they were. The interviews show that Christian Meditation plays a major role in this process. In the following subsections I have extracted the central aspects of the informants' path to themselves.

5.1.1 *Awareness of Oneself through Christian Meditation*

Through Christian Meditation the informants become more aware of themselves and the processes that take place in them. Many informants mention seeing the negative sides of oneself as the effect of meditation. The awareness of oneself is the starting point for the following aspects described by the informants: *witnessing oneself, working on oneself, and accepting oneself*.

Uldis describes Christian Meditation as a good but not always a pleasant tool, because he encountered himself from different sides. Uldis calls his initial experience of Christian Meditation a straightforward mirror where he saw everything that was happening within himself:

It's not exactly a distorting mirror, but on the contrary a straightforward mirror where you look inside yourself. Then you see the things and thoughts that occur inside you. You cannot run away at that particular moment [while meditating]. Then you get to know yourself in very comprehensive and diverse ways.

This corresponds with Rubenis, who writes that during meditation we see ourselves like in a mirror: cleaved, frightened, full of fantasies, anger, aggression, and as self-centred people.¹ Uldis says that before Christian Meditation he was only partially aware of his negative sides, but when “encountered directly, it was a wake-up call” for him. Nevertheless, he explains that he encountered also good sides of himself. Uldis describes himself as being a complex unit:

You experience the things that dwell within you, and you see there different things – all the bad things, desires, thoughts, all sorts of disgusting things without trying to embellish, really disgusting things. At the same time you experience good things. We are a complex unit, made of different things.

Ina discovered that there were many lies in her; and that she came closer to her true self through Christian Meditation, “I discovered there are so many different kinds of lies inside me. I saw that there is a lot in me that is not mine. Meditation allowed me to enter and feel my depths, to touch my true self.”

A greater awareness of oneself can also be seen in Anna’s description of her experience. She illustrates Christian Meditation as a difficult tool, because it makes one be honest and true to oneself, and aware of the issues that one tries to escape from in the daily life:

On the one hand it [Christian Meditation] is easy, on the other hand it is a difficult tool, as it encourages people to be more true to themselves and see the painful issues. Christian Meditation aggravates the painful issues in oneself. (...) Meditation simply forces one to feel them.

Baiba points out that Christian Meditation can be problematic for some people, because they are afraid of meeting themselves, “because when you are by yourself in silence, then you are really faced with your demons.”

Janis says that he used to think about himself as a very calm person, but that meditation helped him see that anger takes a great part of his life, “meditation is what takes away the illusion (...) you start understanding what you are made of.”

When I ask Rudolfs about meditation’s impact on how he relates to himself, Rudolfs says that he realized that he was not the one he thought he was:

You see what you previously did not see. That was a tough experience. But I slowly accept the ugly that is in me, and I just have to live with it. In order to control it, you need to be acquainted with it. Meditation is a scary thing because at some point you realize what is really going on inside you.

¹ (Rubenis, 2008, p. 93)

The experiences that are described by the informants can be viewed through the theoretical perspective of the true and false self. They can be interpreted as unloading the parts of the false self, which, according to Keating, is one of the effects of a contemplative prayer.² They take the form of thoughts, memories or emotions.³ Keating notes that contemplative prayer gives rise to the experience of human weakness through humiliating self-knowledge. “Self-knowledge” is the traditional term for the coming to consciousness of the dark side of one’s personality.⁴

The objective of Christian Meditation is to let the thoughts and emotions come and then let them go. In order to get rid of undigested material, one needs to become aware of it, and feel it.⁵

Rubenis emphasizes that people often think that starting a spiritual practice will immediately be followed by peace and silence, “But often just as the consciousness calms down, the aggressive tendencies that are residing in us appear on its surface.”⁶ Rubenis underlines that the path to the peace goes through the turmoil. The awareness of the opposing forces residing within oneself is a prerequisite for their integration.⁷

However, some neuroscientists and meditation teachers point out that meditation can be dangerous for some people.⁸ Rubenis stresses that Christian Meditation is not advised for people who suffer from mental illness.⁹ Sometimes the issues unfolded during meditation are so serious that one needs psychiatric help. Other times, according to Keating, people need psychotherapy to handle repressed emotions and feelings. Therefore, the teamwork between spiritual guides and psychological professionals is important.¹⁰ It is recommended to practise Christian Meditation twenty minutes twice a day. Keating emphasizes the fidelity to the daily practice as “this gradually exposes us to the unconscious at a rate that we can handle.”¹¹

5.1.2 The Experience of Witnessing Oneself as an Aspect of Christian Meditation

In the previous subsection I presented the aspect of becoming aware of one’s unconscious. Here I will look at the aspect of witnessing (or inner observation)¹² of oneself. I

² (Keating, 2002, p. 15)

³ (Keating & Simpson, 1997)

⁴ Keating, 2002, p. 15

⁵ (Keating, 1997)

⁶ Rubenis, 2008, p. 76

⁷ (Rubenis, 2008, pp. 76-77)

⁸ See (Garden, 2007)

⁹ (Rubenis, 2008, p. 16)

¹⁰ (Keating, 1999, pp. 25-26)

¹¹ (Keating, 1999, p. 20)

¹² In Latvian the informants use the word “vērot”

have chosen to apply this term as the informants use it themselves to describe their experience of Christian Meditation.

According to Ken Wilber¹³ (1949 –) the first thing that occurs in the initial period of awareness meditation¹⁴, including Christian Meditation, is the realization of one’s mind, which is full of “thoughts, images, fantasies, notions, ideas, concepts.”¹⁵ The point of this initial period is to become aware of the thoughts and to witness them with “no praise, no condemnation, no judgment.”¹⁶ Wilber calls it “a detached witnessing”, which a meditator develops with time.¹⁷ In the work of pure prayer, according to Freeman, one’s false identification with the ego is gradually diminished, and the true self begins to emerge.¹⁸ Freeman states that pure prayer denotes a prayer “without ego”, “without self-consciousness, self-analysis”.¹⁹

Even if Wilber is drawing basically from Eastern meditation practices, this can also be applied to Christian Meditation. According to the Episcopal priest, and internationally known retreat leader, Cynthia Bourgeault, the idea of witnessing or inner observation is also a significant element of Christian tradition.²⁰ Keating speaks of how contemplative practice enables a person to look at life’s inevitable emotional upsets like a “second-rate movie”, “You realize you can just walk out!”²¹

Mari Skrede shows in her research that long-term meditators describe a feature of accepting what comes along which gives them the notion of being a witness observing what is happening inside and outside and then letting go of it; witnessing in some cases could be generalized to daily life.²²

The awareness of the emotions, processes and thoughts inside oneself, witnessing and then letting them go is an important aspect of the experience of Christian Meditation in this study. Many informants apply the aspect of witnessing not only to the particular meditation session but to their daily life, as described in Skrede’s research.

¹³ Ken Wilber is an American philosopher and the author of over twenty books. He is the founder of Integral Institute, a think-tank for studying integral theory and practice, with outreach through local and online communities such as Integral Education Network, Integral Training, and Integral Spiritual Center.

¹⁴ Vipassana, dhyana, prajna, visualization, koan, contemplative prayer (Wilber, 2011, para. 7).

¹⁵ (Wilber, 2011, The Psychic Level section, para. 2)

¹⁶ (Wilber, 2011, The Psychic Level section, para. 3)

¹⁷ (Wilber, 2001, p. 118)

¹⁸ (Freeman, 2007a, p. 8)

¹⁹ (Ibid.)

²⁰ She refers to both the Western and Orthodox contemplatives to demonstrate the practice of witnessing (See, Bourgeault, 2010, p. 263)

²¹ As referred to in (Bourgeault, 2010, p. 262)

²² (Skrede, 2008, p. 29)

Ilva, when talking about her initial meditation experience, mentions that the thoughts are like clouds, which try to pull one back to the everyday life. She says that after a while it becomes easier not to be caught up in one's thoughts but let them go:

Everybody has things that one thinks intensely about. It is one of the greatest problems as it is hard to distance yourself from your thoughts... you get carried away by your thoughts. The most important thing is not to go with them, not to give in to your thoughts. You see them, you let them go. With time it becomes easier.

Ilva describes the experience of a detached witnessing of her thoughts, as I interpret it. She points out that it is important not to go with one's thoughts but see them, be aware of them and let them go. Wilber points out that the real difficulty is not the particular thought or emotion but our attachment and identification with it.²³ One of Christian Meditation's goals is to *become simple*. Simplicity means going beyond self-reflectiveness, "there is the absence of 'I' as a separate ego."²⁴

Rudolfs, when asked about the influence of Christian Meditation on his attitude to himself, says that he has gained the ability to sit down and look at himself and his thoughts, "Once you look at them, they quiet down themselves." The aspect of becoming aware, witnessing the thoughts and letting them go can be seen in Rudolfs' experience. Janis emphasizes also the aspect of witnessing in meditation – becoming more aware of his thoughts and behaviour. He mentions experiencing it as a benefit in the daily life as well. According to Janis, the aspect of non-judgmental witnessing is the core of meditation:

It [benefit] is the ability to observe oneself. Meditation is witnessing. At the moment I'm angry, now I am playing some role, okay play it. It is not so much that you immediately become a different person, but you are just looking at yourself. (...) To witness uncritically and without judgment is a quite difficult spiritual exercise.

The aspect of witnessing can also be seen in Uldis' experience. After Uldis mentions that Christian Meditation helped him get to know himself, I ask him about how meditation assisted him in this process. Uldis replies that it helps him to accept things after one learns to let go of them without fighting them, "One of the requirements is that you let everything be. You do not judge yourself and others. You record the issues arising within yourself, you don't

²³ (Wilber, 2001, p. 117)

²⁴ (Freeman, 2007, p. 8)

fight with them. The moment of not fighting is very important.” He explains further that it is not passivity, it is accepting oneself. Uldis mentions, like Janis, that he becomes more aware of his thoughts and senses in the everyday life, “Breath, calm down, let go of things. You even physically feel yourself as you are at that moment.” As I interpret his experience, it is the witnessing of his inner processes – thoughts, feelings, emotions without judging and fighting them, in order to let go of them. This conforms to how Wilber describes the initial experience of awareness meditation. According to Rohr, in order to see the reality and other people, we need to “take ownership and responsibility for our inner processes (*largely unconscious* tendencies to fear, judge, eliminate, dismiss, attack, merge, take control, pull back),”²⁵ or else, the unconscious motivation will secretly affect our decisions throughout our lives.”²⁶

5.1.3 *Christian Meditation as Working on Oneself*

Another aspect that is mentioned by the majority of the informants is that Christian Meditation involves constant working on oneself. The path to self-encounter involves dealing with the unconscious motivations.

Anna describes the path of Christian Meditation as a way to improvement and developing of oneself. She says that if a person who practises Christian Meditation goes courageously through the tough moments in meditation, when one encounters the painful issues in oneself, then one starts becoming more patient and kind. *Courage* that is needed on the path to the self-encounter is mentioned several times also by other informants. It takes courage to look into oneself and make changes. Keating points out that one needs a willingness to be exposed to the unconscious that requires courage and persistence.²⁷

Baiba underlines also the aspect of Christian Meditation as working on oneself. She highlights the importance of giving herself time to give something back to other people, “We all want to be happy, better people, better parents, but we don’t want to do anything. Here is the aspect of working on oneself. You have to give yourself time in order to share something with other people.”

Martins looks at Christian Meditation as a pleasant, but hard work. Ilva says, “Christian Meditation is working on oneself. As though you sat and did nothing, but at the same time you are doing the most important work.”

Working on oneself can be understood as releasing of one’s unconscious motivations and desires, detaching oneself from one’s false identification with the self – false self. The

²⁵ (Rohr, 2013a, para. 6)

²⁶ (Keating, 1999, pp. 18-19)

²⁷ (Keating, 1999, p. 19)

aspect of working on oneself is not connected to trying to acquire anything because meditation is experienced as non-acquisitive, “The dynamic of meditation is not trying to get anything but to lose, to let go. It is in the losing and the letting go that we will find everything that we have, everything that we are given.”²⁸

5.1.4 The Aspect of Accepting Oneself

Another aspect of the informants’ experience of Christian Meditation is accepting and embracing themselves. According to Rubenis, Christian Meditation is a way of becoming a whole person in the sense of integrating the aggressive and hostile sides of oneself. In order to integrate them, one has to become aware of them.²⁹

Practising Christian Meditation has helped Ina to regain the courage to be herself, to be honest to herself and others. She mentions perceiving herself differently, “I felt myself as a completely different person, in the sense that the real me is very diverse. I can also be nasty. I am more real.” She mentions also that she integrated the evil in herself after she became aware of it, in the sense that she embraced also the dark sides of herself as a part of the process of practising Christian Meditation.

Baiba mentions the aspect of courage to embrace herself and not be afraid of making mistakes. She says that, “you are not perfect, but you are not afraid of making mistakes. You are not afraid of being the person you are and acknowledge your mistakes.” Christian Meditation helps Baiba to look at herself critically, “you really see so many things where you could be better and where you have a problem.” At the same time, she points out that it is important not to tear oneself into pieces. It is important to find balance between working on one’s faults and accepting them.

When I ask Andrejs what Christian Meditation means to him, he replies by saying that he is able to uncover and take away the layers of his ego, “I am able to remove more and more layers of my ego”, thus “becoming a better person”. When I ask him to explain what he means by “a better person” then he clarifies that he is becoming a whole person by embracing and encompassing his faults, “I am becoming a whole person, by including also all my faults and imperfections.” Further Andrejs mentions seeing pride, arrogance, envy, judging and evaluating others, selfishness, egocentrism, carelessness, and fear in him. He says, “Sure we have all those things in us”, but the important thing is to integrate them. However, it is also significant to

²⁸ (Freeman, 2013b, p. 9)

²⁹ (Rubenis, 2008, p. 77)

reduce these faults by taking off the layers of ego, thus “approaching the teaching of Christ, approaching God”.

Freeman underlines that meditation is a middle path between self-denial and self-rejection on the one hand, and self-indulgence and narcissism on the other. In meditation “we learn to accept ourselves as we are, without judgment, without partiality. We come to know ourselves. Then, as we know ourselves, we see beyond ourselves; we see that our true centre is not in ourselves, but in God.”³⁰ It can be summarized in three words: self-acceptance; self-knowledge; self-transcendence.³¹ In order to accept oneself, one needs to face one’s dark side and “the complex self-contradictory dynamics”³² happening within oneself. However, one has to do it “without self-deception, without repression, and without pious evasion.”³³

5.2 Christian Meditation as a Part of Being

A central theme in the interview material is experiencing Christian Meditation as a part of being. When talking about the experience of Christian Meditation, many informants express its imprescriptible and natural place in their lives. They describe having an inner need to meditate in the everyday life.

When I ask Arturs about his path to Christian Meditation, he says that it was difficult in the beginning and that he did not always succeed. In the initial period he went away and came back to this meditation practice many times. Later he decided to do it on a regular basis, “gradually it became a part of my being, a natural part of my life. I cannot imagine my life without it (...)” Arturs describes a difficult beginning of the practice, which is connected to the regularity of meditating. The same aspect can be seen in other informants’ experiences, where the majority mentions a difficult beginning of the practice. Freeman recognizes that Christian Meditation is a simple but a demanding discipline, “There is nothing simpler than meditation. (...) But as anyone who has tried it knows, being simple isn’t easy.”³⁴ Freeman states that it takes time, sometimes years to include a regular practice into daily life.³⁵

Ilva describes her beginning of Christian Meditation as “not so simple” and that only slowly with time she managed to acquire the right technique with the help of breathing and mantra. She notes that a regular practice is important in order to let go of thoughts. After years of practising, she says that “it has become a necessity and a completely organic part of my life”.

³⁰ (Freeman, 2013c, p. 4)

³¹ (Ibid.)

³² (Freeman, 2013c, p. 7)

³³ (Ibid.)

³⁴ (Freeman, 2013a, p. 4)

³⁵ (Freeman, 2013, p. 23)

When I ask Baiba how often she meditates, Baiba mentions that she tries to meditate every day and that it is crucial for her to make time for it. For her meditation is a part of her life and her rhythm of life, “I feel that it is a necessity of life. It is just like eating and breathing (...).”

Ina, when asked about her frequency of Christian Meditation, expresses that she tries to meditate twice every day, but that she does not always succeed in accomplishing that. Ina describes an inner drive and need to meditate, “There are falls and longer breaks, but there is an inner drive, a need for meditation.” Furthermore she mentions that Christian Meditation has become a part of who she is. It is something very profound and fundamental to her, “When I did not practise Christian Meditation, then I, somehow, did not have my identity. Christian Meditation is something very important and profound to me.”

Both Oskars and Andrejs express the inner need to practise Christian Meditation. Oskars says, “silent meditation...it is an inner necessity for me.” Andrejs expresses it by saying, “I feel the necessity; I feel that it enriches and develops me.” For Martins it is a natural part of his being, “I need it the same as I need to eat.”

Madara describes Christian Meditation as a difficult path, “The beginning is tough. It is not an easy path, it is a tough path. But once you start, it is hard to quit. I find it easier now. I have included it [Christian Meditation] in my rhythm of life.”

Drawing from what the informants express, it is apparent that it takes time to come to a regular meditation practice. It is difficult in the beginning, but with time it becomes a part of one’s life, a part of one’s being. According to Freeman, at first the practice of meditation is experienced as hard and un-familiar, “With practice it becomes familiar and delightful. Gradually it becomes a good habit, a way of life, and the work of the meditation periods penetrates all areas of our life, inner and outer.”³⁶

5.3 Christian Meditation as a Way towards God - Being with God

Many informants describe Christian Meditation as a way to come closer to God. They illustrate that through coming closer to oneself, one also approaches God.

Andrejs expresses that through Meditation he approaches himself, and in that way he also comes nearer to God. Ilva expresses the same, “In reality, through meditation you get to know yourself to a great extent, thus you are coming closer to God.” When I ask Madara what Christian Meditation means to her, she replies that it is a path to herself, and she explains that

³⁶ (Freeman, 2013a, pp. 32-33)

it is also a path to God, “Christian Meditation is the possibility to be vis-à-vis with the primary source.”

The relationship with God is a central element in many informants’ lives. Christian Meditation is also described as a way to be with God. Ilva explains that Christian Meditation is a prayer in silence and that, “You turn fully to God with your whole being and love.” Ilva calls this process a “relationship with God”. This relationship that Ilva describes evolves with time. She mentions three important things that are a part of her life: reading Scripture, praying and meditating, “With time one comes to the point where the relationship with God is formed with the whole heart.”

Anna says that her relationship with God has become closer and that her heart has become more open after she started meditating, “My heart has become more open. It can somehow receive more from God and it is also able to give more to people.” As I understood it when interviewing Anna, the relationship with God is very important to her. At the same time she mentions having a difficult time in meditation when the interview took place and not meditating so often. The reason for that, according to Anna, is the meditation’s effect of exposing the painful issues, thus making a person “be more honest to oneself”. When I ask what meaning meditation has in her life, she says that it has a significant place and that she has turned her attention more to God after she started meditating:

I do not have the opportunity to compare how it would be if I had not meditated, because I can only tell you what my life had gained through meditation. I have in general turned my attention more to God.

However, Anna underlines that meditation for her is not the only way to approach God. She mentions using other forms of prayer, which provide her with the most complete practice of prayer.

When interviewing Indulis Paics, one of the leaders of Christian Meditation in the Tornkalna church, he explains that we often believe in Christianity in such a way that external things like teachings, proper doctrines, proper formulations, forms of worship and ceremonies are of central importance. He further points out that we sometimes lose the essential content behind the external activities and issues; and that the key element is the personal experience of being with God. Paics says:

For me it is a practice that reminds me that God and our relationship with him are in the centre, and then it is surrounded by all kinds of our human formulations and attempts to put it all into words.

Rubenis writes that Christian Meditation is a meeting with God in the centre of one's being. This experience is beyond any possibilities of discursive perception and description.³⁷

Janis talks about trust in God that is needed in Christian Meditation. He says that one needs to rely on God, and that "it is arrogance that one thinks that one can repair oneself. (...) It is really hard to admit that what you need is the reliance on the Higher Power. You cannot repair yourself." For Janis the starting point for Christian Meditation was a tough period in his life. He describes intuitive coming to Christian Meditation. He says that "you think that you need more power to repair yourself, but no...you just need grace." Janis notes further, "In the spiritual path, there are two pillars: discipline and grace. Discipline is your share and the grace is God's share." Janis explains that "people have intuitive aspiration for Enlightenment, but that they do not realize that." For him discipline and working on himself is crucial in order to grow spiritually – "to get upward" as he expresses that. But at the same time the reliance on God's grace is essential.

Drawing from Merton, true self is the deepest part of one's being, one's foundation and centre, which is united with God.³⁸ That is why the spiritual search for God is also experienced as the search for oneself.³⁹ Merton writes, "If I find Him, I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him."⁴⁰ Meditation is experienced as coming closer to the central point of one's being, by finding one's roots in God, who is the ground of one's being.⁴¹

5.4 Christian Meditation as an Anchor

A recurring theme that I found in the interview material is "Christian Meditation as an Anchor". The term "anchor" is used by Uldis and the same aspects of other informants' experiences can also be put under this term. Uldis uses this term to describe Christian Meditation as a method that helps him stay in balance with himself. It stabilizes his inner and outer life. At the same time it practically helps him to focus and handle difficult situations:

Meditation for me has always been an anchor to return to when things fall apart. When I'm saturated with emotions or thoughts, or when I am under very great stress, then it is a good way... method... practice to which I can return to.

³⁷ (Rubenis, 2008, p. 53)

³⁸ (Sandman, 2000, The Fruits of Centering Prayer section, para. 4)

³⁹ (Keating, 1999, p. 8; Rubenis, 2008, p. 9)

⁴⁰ (Merton, 1960, p. 23)

⁴¹ (Rubenis, 2008, pp. 9; 53; (Freeman, 1997, p. 8)

Uldis mentions that Christian Meditation has helped him gather himself up and stay focused when he experienced tough times in life. Uldis points out that practising Christian Meditation has helped make better decisions in stressful situations:

When you are practicing [Christian Meditation], then you have a greater resource in conflict or stress situations to stop, calm down, and make better decisions with respect to the situation and people, and to assess the things objectively as they are. (...) You have a new energy. Thoughts do not run about and you can concentrate on the things you need to do.

A similar term to “anchor” is used by Janis who portrays himself as a boat in a wavy sea and that Christian Meditation provides him with a *keel*⁴² under the boat. Janis uses the term “keel” to explain that practising Christian Meditation gives him stability, “It [the boat] has a very great support in the depth [of the sea]. Christian Meditation simply does not allow it to tip over, and I feel it myself. (...) So, it gives me stability.” The stability is connected to his emotions and reactions towards other people and the world. Janis mentions feeling much more anxious and nervous if he has not meditated for three days, “In everyday life you realize - oh, I have not meditated for three days; the life has become extremely nervous. No, not the life, but I have become more nervous.”

Janis says that he has become calmer and that he perceives the world and people in a more peaceful way. Thus, the practice of Christian Meditation can be connected to inner stability, inner peace, as I interpret it. A regular practice helps him maintain the stability and peace with the outer world. Janis also describes becoming more aware of his reactions. He describes how he becomes more attentive to himself and others. Moreover, it can also be linked to becoming more aware of the processes that occur inside him and witnessing them, as discussed in the previous chapters, “You start looking at the world in a more peaceful way. Well, that person is insulting; he has always been like that. Okay, I do not assault him back.”

The key concepts that relate to “Christian Meditation as an Anchor” are *focus on the present moment; balance between outer and inner world; inner peace*. These aspects are interconnected. I will discuss these topics that were addressed by a number of informants as follows.

5.4.1 *Focus on the Present Moment*

Focus on the present moment, as an important benefit to deal with stressful events and situations, is mentioned by many informants. Anna who practises also other forms of prayer in

⁴² “Kīlis” in Latvian

addition to Christian Meditation explains that she prays the so-called Jesus' prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner" inside herself when she experiences difficult moments in her life, and that it helps her stay focused and not to sink into despair. Ina says similarly that she uses a mantra to stay focused in desperate times. The prayer or mantra that she uses helps her handle the tough situations and emotions:

The beginning was very hard, but I am now stabilized. If anything happens, then I return myself to the prayer. It helps me live. If I have some kind of difficult experiences or emotions, then I return to myself, to the centre and depths of myself.

Moreover, Ina mentions also living in the current moment and focusing the attention on the present moment, "I focus myself on the prayer and just go forward. I live in the present moment. I do not scatter my attention to the external world, to all sorts of things. I am able to hold it." Freeman, drawing from the teachings of Cassian and the Desert Fathers, suggests saying mantra in times of adversity and in times of prosperity in order to get beyond the self-reflectiveness.⁴³

When I ask Sanita what she has gained from practising Christian Meditation, she says that she is able to be more focused, "It helps me focus on the work that I do, where I cannot make mistakes. Meditation frees me from the tension." It is a greater focus on the particular moment which helps Sanita to release the tension.

Also Arturs describes Christian Meditation as helping him focus on the particular moment, thus helping him cope with anxiety. Arturs mentions having had a depression and having used antidepressants prior to starting the practice of Christian Meditation, but thanks to the meditation he has not used medicaments for years. Thereby, Christian Meditation has helped Arturs to stabilize his life and be present at the particular moment, "Thanks to meditation I learned to focus on the particular moment, but at the particular moment, as known, there are no problems that cannot be resolved, because they are happening at that particular moment."

According to Rubenis, meditation helps one to learn the fundamentally important state of being *here* and *now*.⁴⁴ Freeman underlines that thinking of the past leads to feeling of regret, nostalgia, melancholy or guilt. Yet, living in the future triggers fear, anxiety and worry. It is only the present moment which is absolute reality; and a mantra clears a way to this reality, "It is only in the present moment that we can find God, the God who calls himself 'I AM'."⁴⁵ In

⁴³ (Freeman, 2007a, p. 8)

⁴⁴ (Rubenis, 2008, p. 9)

⁴⁵ (Freeman, 2011, pp. 25-26)

addition, Freeman emphasizes that living in the present moment is practised in the daily life, it is being fully conscious in the here and now.⁴⁶

5.4.2 *Balance between Inner and Outer World*

Another aspect that is mentioned by the informants is the balance between the inner and the outer world/life, which Christian Meditation promotes.

For Ilva meditation is a way to stay in balance with herself and the outer world. It helps her find herself when some problem appears and look at the events from a different perspective:

The world is terrible if you look around. It is really awful. There is a disorder in all things. How to withstand that? Meditation is one way how to endure that. You go into silence. (...) You calm down, you come out of the problem, it helps to find yourself in the swirl⁴⁷ and when the moment of meditation is completed then you are different. You can look at past events differently.

Ina points out that the words that Juris Rubenis told her were very significant. He said that the wideness⁴⁸ has to be consistent with the depth, “We can go as widely to the outside world, as deep we have gone into ourselves. I’m trying to follow this proportion, knowing that I tend to go to the wideness.” As I understand, Christian Meditation helps Ina keep the balance between the inner life, that is the depth, and the outer life that are her daily activities and work.

Ina, when I ask her about what Christian Meditation means to her, says that “it is a practice how to return to myself and feel myself in the daily life. It is a way of regaining contact with myself, looking into my soul and being the person I am”. She says something that can be seen as becoming aware or conscious of the contact with herself, “I was never actually in contact with myself, at least consciously, before I began to meditate.” She said that what she thought was her inner life, turned out to be the external life, “Thoughts, dreams, feelings and everything else that has a form are parts of the external life. The sense of presence is the deepest. Simply, I am.” Rohr writes that we are all victims of the mind and our “thinking”⁴⁹: “Most of us think we are our thinking.”⁵⁰

Uldis describes himself as a person who is more orientated towards his head. Lots of thoughts go through his mind, and they tend to really depress him at times when he yields to them. Christian Meditation has been useful to Uldis in situations where he has been oversaturated with thoughts, “It has saved me from cognitive dissonance.” He points out further

⁴⁶ (Freeman, 2011, p. 26)

⁴⁷ Describing spinning motion of life

⁴⁸ Plašums in Latvian

⁴⁹ (Rohr, 2013a, para. 2)

⁵⁰(Rohr, 2014, para. 2)

that it is very valuable to note that the mind cannot solve all the problems or paradoxes where there is no solution to find, “It is very beneficial to remember that you cannot solve everything with the mind and that everything cannot always be solved with a very active action. Sometimes it is really just necessary to sit down and let things flow.” Christian Meditation is a way for Uldis to find inner balance between himself and his thoughts, emotions, stress which are the outer world to great extent.

In light of what the informants have said here, Christian Meditation helps maintaining balance between their being and their doing. In the Christian tradition Martha and Mary in the Gospel of Luke⁵¹ came to symbolize these two dimensions of action and contemplation, representing two complementary dimensions of a person.⁵² Martha corresponds to the active and busy life people lead every day. Mary stands for the contemplative part of one’s being, meditating, being still and listening to the teacher.⁵³ Freeman underlines these both sides are needed to realize the fullness of life.⁵⁴ Christian Meditation provides the informants in this study with a tool to cultivate an interior silence, which, according to Freeman, is the foundation of how one deals with one’s daily life.⁵⁵

5.4.3 *Inner Peace*

Another aspect, which the informants underline, is gaining and maintaining the inner peace in the daily life. Many informants mention becoming calmer and steadier. Peace, peaceful and calm down⁵⁶ are recurring words that are used by the informants when describing the meaning of Christian Meditation in their lives.

Oskars points out that Christian Meditation has helped him cope with stressful and emotionally hard situations, “Meditation was pretty hard at times. I had panic attacks. (...) it [Christian Meditation] really helped me calm down. You can go in silence and be with yourself; and fear or some other emotions quiet down and step back.”

Baiba says that Christian Meditation helps her live a more structured and peaceful life, thus of a better quality. Baiba points out also that Christian Meditation helps her balance her concern, “It really helps me live peacefully, to understand which things are worth worrying about and which are not worth the bother.” Baiba mentions that practising Christian Meditations has helped her approach different issues connected to her job more peacefully without

⁵¹ Luke 10:32-42

⁵² (Freeman, 2013a, p. 15)

⁵³ (Nataraja, 2014, para. 1)

⁵⁴ (Ibid.)

⁵⁵ (Freeman, 2011, p. 16)

⁵⁶ *Miers, mierīgs, nomierināties* in Latvian

intensified emotions, “Meditation has enabled me to sort out my thoughts and peacefully look at the issues [connected to her job], not with intense emotions.” As I interpret it, she has gained a greater inner emotional stability and peace, which helps her taking more objective decisions.

Ilva mentions also that with time she has observed that maintaining balance in different stressful situations is easier than before. Ilva says that it is very important for her temper, because of her emotionality. Like Baiba, Ilva says that through the process of meditation, through being in peace she finds solutions to problems more peacefully, logically and more reasonably. In addition, meditation helps her see the important things and let go of the unnecessary ones, “You just notice what you need to see”.

When I ask Sanita what Christian Meditation means to her, she replies that it is a search for peace and harmony; and meditation helps her achieve that, “I can get rid of the tension inside me, of the feeling that I have to do something, that I will not manage it.” Sanita points out, like Ilva and Baiba, that meditation helps her get rid of the inessential things that hinder her life. These three informants all mention focusing on the essential things and letting go of the unnecessary and irrelevant ones as a significant factor in obtaining the inner peace. It can be seen as a greater contact with oneself to really feel what is essential in one’s life and what is not.

The aspect of gaining inner peace conforms to the finding of the research conducted by Boyle and Cotton where the results showed that 60% of all respondents were much more relaxed, much less anxious and stressed after they started practising Christian Meditation.⁵⁷

5.5 Christian Meditation and Relationship with Other People

As we saw in the previous section the contact with oneself was crucial in gaining peace, overcoming stressful situations and balancing the inner and outer world. I asked all the informants during the interviews how practising Christian Meditation had affected their relationship with other people in their lives. The majority says that it has had a significant impact on their relationships. It has influenced how the informants approach people and how they form new relationships. In some cases it was mentioned by the informants that practising Christian Meditation and the changes it has brought were challenging for their existing relationships. Moreover, some mention loosing or letting go of relationships because of the changes occurring in them due to Christian Meditation. The informants mention various aspects

⁵⁷ (Boyle & Cotton, 2011)

of experiencing the influence of Christian Meditation on their relationships. In this chapter I will focus on the main aspects that were taken up by the informants.

5.5.1 Greater Attentiveness in Relationship with Others

Both Baiba and Ilva use the words attentive⁵⁸ and attention when talking about how Christian Meditation has influenced their relationships with other people.

Baiba links the concept of attentiveness to listening to other people and accepting different viewpoints. Furthermore, she says that meditation helps her build “better quality relationships with people.” I ask further if she could elaborate on what she means by quality relationships. Baiba replies that it means, “to listen more to what other people are saying. It is the process, where you overcome your egoism and align with their interests.” She remarks that the relationship that she is forming with her partner is on another level and that in the relationship-building stage “it is the ability to look at things differently. It makes me think more about people as such.” Furthermore, Baiba says that meditation helps her understand that she has to devote more time and attention to people. Baiba emphasizes that she tries to tell people important things:

Now I'm trying to tell people more relevant things, to tell a person that he/she is important and dear to me, or what I think about him. It is about finding the time to meet with friends, who are important to me.

When I ask Ilva how her practice of Christian Meditation has influenced her relationships to other people, she mentions becoming more observant and attentive to other people. Ilva says that meditation lets her focus on one thing at a time. When I ask her to elaborate on what she means by being attentive, Ilva explains that being attentive is when we are talking to people, then “we give full attention to the other person, trying to understand what the question is, what I can tell you and what the most important thing is.” She explains further that we try not to think about other issues which we later must attend to or our unfinished works, but we are present in the particular conversation and moment. According to Ilva, attention is the most important thing in a relationship. She mentions also gaining new contacts and new relationships through the practice of Christian Meditation with people who practise and think similarly. Yet, Ilva points out having problems with people who do not understand why she meditates, and who are not interested in it.

⁵⁸ In Latvian “vērīgums”, “vērīgs”, this can also be translated as “observant”. It is connected to paying attention, being in the present moment.

As I understand, meditation helps both Baiba and Ilva be more attentive towards others, which includes listening to what the other person is saying. Baiba emphasizes the ability to overcome her ego and accept other people's viewpoints. Ilva stresses the aspect of being present and giving full attention to the other person. Both emphasize the significant role of attention in the relationships.

5.5.2 *Letting Go of Relationships*

Some informants mention letting go of relationships due to their inner changes resulting from Christian Meditation.

Ina says that many relationships did not survive the changes that occurred in her due to Christian Meditation, "In the process of meditation, I sensed myself and I gained a feeling of who I was." Ina describes realizing that her life was full of lies and ideas that were not hers, and they were not who she was anymore. Ina mentions that she cannot lie anymore, "I am empathic, and I have maybe become even more empathic than before. At the same time I can be harsh when someone is trying to use me or manipulate me. I have become more direct with people." Nevertheless, Ina says that the relationships that she is building now are more honest, sincere and genuine.

Rudolfs mentions that due to his inner change, he has lost and let go of relationships. He says that many things that his previous friends talked about do not seem meaningful anymore, "I mentioned already that my circle of friends has changed. I do not want to say that I am pushed out of the society, but rather I am the reason myself." Rudolfs mentions further that his interests have changed due to his practice of meditation, and that it has altered the relationships, "When you start talking about things that others do not find interesting, it changes the relationship." Rudolfs mentions further that he is able to establish more genuine relationships:

When I came to a point where I had let go of the previous relationships and people, I established a normal relationship, which I had not had before - a healthy relationship. I think that meditation has a direct connection to that.

The experience that is expressed by the informants here can be seen in light of the concept of the true and false self. According to Rohr and Ebert, by experiencing one's shadow side, many relationships are over, because it becomes clear that other people have been only used to create and preserve one's self-image, one's false self.⁵⁹ Disclosure of one's true self,

⁵⁹ (Rohr & Ebert, 2013, p. 46)

according to Rohr, is a threat to the world as one has built it, “After any ‘raising up’ of our true selves, we will no longer fit into many groups” which are “obsessed with and yet indulgent of the false self, because that is all it knows.”⁶⁰

5.5.3 *Calmer in Relationships with Others*

Some informants point to becoming calmer⁶¹ in relationship with other people.

Madara replies to the question about the impact of Christian Meditation on her relationships by saying that, “It affected not only me, but also my relationship with the outside world, with other people, family members, colleagues, and in work situations. I am calmer, more forgiving, more understanding.” Furthermore, Madara says her emotions are more balanced and therefore she is more agreeable to others when socializing. The starting point for Madara is herself. As discussed earlier, Christian Meditation for Madara means a path to herself and bringing order in herself. The starting point is an inner change in her that has brought changes in her relation to the outer world and other people. She mentions inner changes – becoming calmer, more understanding and forgiving – thus having more balanced relationships with other people.

Uldis, when talking about Christian Meditations’ influence on his relationships, says that he has become calmer regarding other people. He speaks of noticing changes in himself when he is not actively practising Christian Meditation. He gets irritated and angry more easily:

I feel the difference. I get irritated and angry more easily... when I’m not doing this practice, I become more impatient, maybe not so dramatically. It is not that I suddenly change to 180 degrees, but I notice and feel it myself, I know that I could respond differently.

The contact with oneself and an inner change, which this contact brings about, is the central element that has brought changes in the informants’ outer lives, thereby relationships with others. Christian Meditation’s function as an anchor which gives the stability between the inner and outer world, between the self and the others, discussed previously, has been the basis for understanding Christian Meditation’s influence on the informants’ relationships. Freeman uses the term “Inner Change” to talk about the fruits of meditation.⁶² He writes that it is in the daily life and relationships, that the person who meditates will notice the fruits of meditation.⁶³ According to Freeman, increasingly contemplative prayer is experienced not as an alternative

⁶⁰ (Rohr, 2013b, pp. x-xi)

⁶¹ “Mierīgāks” in Latvian

⁶² (Freeman, 2011, p. 41)

⁶³ (Galatians 5:22 as cited in Freeman, 2011, p. 41)

to action but its very ground.⁶⁴ It becomes a link between being and doing. Thus, it becomes the foundation of how one approaches and treats other people.

5.6 Summary

Christian Meditation is experienced as a path to oneself in the informants' lives. This path goes through becoming aware of the processes that occur within oneself and witnessing them, both during the particular meditation session and in the daily life. The aspect of working on oneself is also underlined; however, the informants express the necessity to accept oneself, including one's dark sides. The informants express an inner need for meditation in their daily life, and for the majority it has become a part of their being. For many informants Christian Meditation is a way to approach God and a way to cultivate the relationship with Him. To illuminate these aspects I have mainly used the theories of the true and false self. The central element in this theoretical perspective is that by becoming aware of one's false self-systems, one approaches the true self, which is the ground of one's being. By approaching one's true self, one is also coming nearer to God.

Christian Meditation is experienced as an anchor in the informants' lives, referring to the stability that it provides. The stability is connected to such aspects as a greater focus on the present moment, inner peace and the balance between the inner and the outer life. Here Christian Meditation is experienced as a ground of one's daily activities not the alternative to them. In relationships to other people in their lives, the informants describe a greater attentiveness and calmness. Some informants have experienced of losing their relationships. I argue that inner change within the informants is the starting point for experiencing the alterations in their relationships.

⁶⁴ (Freeman, 2013a, pp. 32-33)

6 Experiences and Challenges in Cultural Encounters

I asked all the informants several questions regarding their experiences of encountering other cultures. I asked the informants to give concrete examples of some situations in their lives of how they encountered other cultures.

The informants describe different aspects of their cultural encounters. For many informants it is connected to the context of Latvia, which can be described as a multicultural society, and it can also be connected to globalization by which various elements of different cultures are available and visible to a great extent. The majority emphasizes the significance of a personal meeting and dialogue with representatives of other cultures, where the aspect of individual efforts and wish to meet others is highlighted. The challenges of cultural encounters are also addressed. The informants describe a twofold feeling of encountering other cultures. In the following sections I will present the central themes regarding the experiences and challenges of cultural encounters.

6.1 The Informants' Experiences of Cultural Encounters

Alise: Can you describe a situation in which you encounter other cultures in your daily life?

Ilva: In many sorts of ways... We meet when walking down the street, we hear various languages, see different people, and we read literature. It is all available to us, we can discover it all¹, we travel the world and we can directly encounter very, very different traditions and cultures. (...) It [cultural encounters] is our daily life. We are continuously meeting other cultures.² The more globalized our world is... and as there are no distances, we meet all the time.

The quote above draws attention to the scope of the concept of *cultural encounter*. However, it indicates that cultural encounters are a part of our daily life, not least because it is an effect of globalization. The answers, regarding the questions of what a cultural encounter is and how the informants experience it, show a great variation, which conforms to Ilva's comment. Thus, what cultural encounter is, depends on the people who are involved and their particular context and situation. This can be understood in light of dynamic understanding of culture. Cultural encounters occur in meeting people of other cultures. Cultural encounters are context-conditioned and are subjective.

¹ We can find out about it, the information is available

² It can be translated as coming into contact or encountering

The informants mention several ways in which they experience cultural encounters in their lives. Yet, there is a great number of elements that are recurring in their responses. As the focus of this study is on the way cultural encounters change the informants, I have further extracted the aspects, which characterize cultural encounters in their lives.

6.1.1 A Personal Meeting in Cultural Encounters

One of the central elements the informants underline regarding their experiences of cultural encounter is the aspect of a personal meeting between people and the transformation such encounters involve. Personal meetings open the possibility to be changed by the other and to overcome stereotypes³ about the other in oneself.

Ina emphasizes the aspect of a personal meeting between people, where culture is of secondary significance, “What is culture? It is a social construct. A construct cannot meet another construct; only a person can meet a person.” Janis emphasizes similarly the aspect of meeting between people in cultural encounter, “I think it [cultural encounter] is largely a meeting between people as such.”

For Anna such personal meetings with people of different cultural backgrounds involve a possibility to be changed by the other. It involves mutual exchange of experience, past, thoughts and points of view. Baiba and Arturs stress the ability to learn from experiences of the members of other cultures.

When I ask Sanita how she experiences cultural encounter, one of the elements she mentions is that she experiences it through the people she meets. Sanita tells a story of her meeting an artist from another country⁴ during the summer and experienced a development of friendship entirely without words, a sense of community. Furthermore Sanita adds that she did not have knowledge of the other country and that she had never been there, but that she “just met a person”. As I understand it, then she emphasizes the aspect of a personal meeting and the sense of community that can appear from such meetings where knowledge of the other person’s culture is not of primary importance. Furthermore, she points out that “others say that they [the particular nation that is omitted] are such and such, and that politeness is insincere, well it is not at all like that.” As I understand, those are stereotypes that she addresses and that a meeting on a personal level plays a significant role in order to free oneself from certain prejudices.

³ Stereotypes are prejudices that are used to stamp or stigmatize a particular group. Those are oversimplified and misleading descriptions of an entire group’s “characteristic features” (Eriksen, 2001, p. 68).

⁴ Omitting the name of the country that was given by the informant to take precautions of not revealing the identity of the informant

Martins describes how he experiences cultural encounter by sharing a story of him meeting and having a conversation with a person from a different culture/country,⁵ thus, gaining knowledge about the particular country, “He was telling me about the history and different aspects of culture and I did not know much, and I learned something about that country.” Furthermore, he mentions something that I see as overcoming the stereotypes or previous conceptions that Martins had, “when I previously thought about that country, then I thought that everybody was poor (...), but when one goes deeper, then there is that ‘wow’: I would like to go there, I want to see that.”

Eriksen stresses that the most effective way to combat stereotypes is through better knowledge.⁶ In this case, Sanita and Martins had little knowledge of the culture which the particular people were from, but the personal contact opened for a possibility to look into the other person’s context and to search for common cultural denominators between them. According to Rötting, the most intensive form of dialogue is the personal contact.⁷ In light of the theory of interreligious learning, a personal meeting gives one the possibility to attempt to find a point of contact – an overlapping ground, which opens one to the possibility of transformation and change.

The experiences of the informants show that in cultural encounter, the emphasis is on a personal encounter. This corresponds to Riis, who highlights the significance of encounter and interaction and the way it changes people of primary importance in cultural encounter.⁸ If Buber and Panikkar’s philosophy of dialogue is applied, then a personal encounter opens for a genuine meeting where the other is regarded as a subject and not an It. It gives a possibility for an I and Thou relationship or dialogical dialogue to arise.

6.1.2 *Cultural Encounter as a Dialogue Involving Individual Efforts*

The informants emphasize the aspect of an equal dialogue as an important component of cultural encounter. This conforms to Riis, who states that dialogue is a crucial condition for a constructive cultural encounter. Such dialogue, according to her involves a mutual exchange, openness and responsiveness to the other, and change of one’s own position.⁹

The dialogue in a cultural encounter between people, between I and Thou, which the informants describe, encompass coming closer to one another in a mutual understanding. The central element in such dialogue is individual efforts – qualities and attitudes – which are

⁵ I am not referring to the particular country mentioned by the informant to protect his identity

⁶ (Eriksen, 2001, p. 69)

⁷ (Rötting, 2007, pp. 282-283)

⁸ (Riis, 2006, pp. 13-14)

⁹ (Riis, 2006, pp. 9; 60)

needed to create a mutual understanding. It involves the aspect of listening and hearing the other. Individual efforts include also working on oneself in order to develop the necessary qualities. Many informants emphasize the wish to understand people from other cultures as an essential requirement for dialogue. These various aspects have been mentioned side by side in the informants' stories.

Alise: How do you experience cultural encounter in your life?

Baiba: For me it is connected to mutual dialogue, the ability to talk among advocates of different views, values, and concepts... when there are very different people with different life experiences and perceptions¹⁰ about things. It is the ability to converse in a dialogue, to understand each other and have respect for each other. Because it is easier to say that you all are fools and you do not understand anything.

Baiba places emphasis on the aspect of mutual dialogue in cultural encounter, which, according to her, involves the ability to talk, understand and respect the other person. When I further ask her what she thinks is necessary in order to be able to create a dialogue, Baiba highlights the aspect of developing and working on oneself. She says that one must be “a great enough person¹¹. One must be grown up enough”. Baiba points out that those are skills that one learns in life, because tolerance and ability to understand others are skills to which one gradually comes¹². In addition she notes that it depends on “human aspects – how you as a person are able to treat another person.” Baiba tells a story about how she experienced cultural encounter abroad after there had been bombings involving Islamists. She mentions going by public transportation and experiencing fear and not feeling comfortable when encountering Muslim people. Yet, Baiba emphasizes aspect of dealing with one's reactions, “But here is also the ability to overcome fear, because you really do not have the reason¹³ for it [fear]. Well, there are separate events, but you cannot put everyone in the same basket.” Furthermore, Baiba stresses also a personal interest and wish to understand other cultures as a way to develop the human aspect in a dialogue, “It also develops the human aspect very much that you are ready to take interest¹⁴ into another culture.”

Baiba lays stress on a personal meeting – dialogue – between people in a cultural encounter. The way I interpret it, a dialogue begins with one's attitude – how one meets the other person. According to Baiba, it involves respect, a wish to look into and understand the

¹⁰ Comprehension, understanding

¹¹ She uses the word personality (personība). It denotes the aspect of one's character and individuality

¹² Baiba uses “grows”, meaning that one must grow in order to obtain those skills

¹³ It can also be translated as basis

¹⁴ Could also be translated as “explore”

other person. It includes also personal efforts and working on oneself/one's perceptions and developing the necessary qualities.

For Uldis cultural encounter is a meeting between two people, where personal aspects and attitude are crucial. He illustrates it by saying that “you can have the Bible and the Koran lying on one table and nothing happens. You have two people behind those books, and you either have problems or you do not.” Furthermore, Uldis mentions that he has often encountered people's lack of understanding of particular issues in other cultures, thus, they seem unfamiliar and incomprehensible, but “exactly because they have not had ‘an open chat with coffee’ type of dialogue, you do not have the humanity in those “others” [shows the inverted commas with hands].” Uldis attaches great importance to a mutual and open conversation between people with different cultural backgrounds, thus, finding humanity in the “other”. Uldis points out further that for him “behind the many cultures, which are “the others” [shows the inverted commas with hands again and uses the term in English], stand real people.” He mentions having many friends and acquaintances from other countries and cultures with different religious backgrounds.

When I ask Arturs how he experiences cultural encounter in his life, he mentions personal meetings with people who have different religious backgrounds. One of the elements of cultural encounter that he accentuates is dialogue. Arturs recalls a meeting with people of different religious background¹⁵ and finding out in a mutual dialogue that they had very little in common regarding religion and theology, but much in common concerning spirituality, and the way to communicate with God:

It is very interesting that we have very little in common from a religious point of view; but if you look at a shared experience of how to communicate with God, then there we found many common things, despite our theological differences.

In addition, Arturs underlines the aspect of individual efforts in meeting people with different religious backgrounds. He says that he seeks “to hear and see others, perceive them as honest people who have an authentic religious experience.” Furthermore, he points out that one can perceive other people as enemies and say that others are wrong, but if one admits that another person may also be right, that he simply has different interpretation of a common religious experience, then one is able to perceive others with greater tolerance, delicacy, and empathy. Arturs emphasizes the aspect of listening in a dialogue, “Dialogue is a meeting

¹⁵ I do not refer to the exact name of the religious movement mentioned by Arturs to protect his identity

between two people. When one is inclined to monologue, the meeting does not happen. It is important to remember that dialogue is also a skill of listening to the other person.”

Ina, when talking about what cultural encounter means in her life, highlights the personal effort and the wish for getting to know and understand others:

The external shapes are so diverse... it is important to be interested in others; it is a desire to get to know, understand and love others. It is important not to put everybody in the same basket, but at the same time be in contact with oneself. It seems to me that only through depth – through knowing yourself – you can somehow feel another culture, another person.

Rudolfs emphasizes the aspect of listening to each other in encountering other people of different cultural backgrounds, “It is necessary to meet and talk with people. All the problems arise from the fact that everyone is sitting in their cosy homes, thinking their own wise thoughts, and not wanting to hear each other.”

Paics emphasizes a more practical perspective in order to arrive at a mutual understanding. Paics underlines that it is necessary not to be afraid of experiencing and learning about the culture from within by being involved in joint activity with people in other cultures, and to gain an internal knowledge and a point of view of other person’s culture.

The way I understand the views expressed by the informants above, cultural encounter embraces the aspect of dialogue. Dialogue involves a mutual exchange, where the goal is to achieve a mutual understanding. It begins with a personal wish to take the first step to the other person. The informants emphasize the importance of having an individual approach to the other person without putting everybody in the same basket. Dialogue includes a wish to personally meet and understand the other person. This is concordant with Levinas, who views “I” as responsible to initiate and maintain dialogue.

Moreover, the informants underline the significance of one’s attitude, which is crucial in getting involved in a dialogue. It encompasses working on oneself in order to develop the necessary qualities, which are – respect, tolerance, the ability to listen and hear the other. Dialogue involves knowing oneself before one enters the dialogue in order to achieve open, equal and reciprocal dialogue. This corresponds to Teasdale, who writes that dialogue is an attitude before it is an activity, which requires mutual acceptance, willingness and generosity of heart.¹⁶ Moreover, Buber writes that openness, directness, mutuality, and presence are qualities of a genuine dialogue.

¹⁶ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 5)

6.1.3 *Better Understanding of Oneself through Meeting Other Cultures*

Another central element that I found in the interview material was the aspect of gaining a better understanding of oneself through encountering people in other cultures. Some mention an encounter with another religious tradition, which helps them achieve a more complete awareness of themselves. The informants describe attaining a chance to look at themselves from a different point of view and learn from other people.

Arturs, when talking about the aspects of cultural encounter in his life, says that the cultural encounter is a benefit and a positive experience for him. He stresses the aspect of learning and benefiting spiritually from other person's experience:

Looking at the other person, the other person's thinking and beliefs, it is always a positive aspect, not negative, but positive, because a truly spiritually developed person is able to find something instructive and useful in other person's experiences, thoughts, way of thinking, and culture.

When I ask Ilva how she experiences cultural encounter in her life, she emphasizes the aspect of gaining a more comprehensive understanding of herself and her own culture through encountering people in other cultures:

I think that it [cultural encounter] is a very beneficial to a person, because you can see¹⁷ much when comparing, and you can best understand your own culture if you have seen other cultures. If you have not seen anything, and if you have not experienced¹⁸ anything, then you are unable to assess¹⁹ yourself, because you have only one narrow viewpoint. Through coming into contact with people of other traditions, languages or countries, you simply gain a different point of view, you start seeing wider²⁰.

For Rudolf's cultural encounter is an opportunity to learn a different opinion and look at matters from another point of view. It is a possibility for him to make an effort to be in other people's shoes. He describes this experience as enriching. Rudolf's points out that it is important and necessary to talk and meet with people personally even if it sometimes is difficult. He emphasizes the inner change which occurs as a result from the personal cultural encounters. This change is connected to learning about other cultures and their values, changing and expanding his way of thinking and seeing from others' point of view. By encountering these inner changes, Rudolf's experiences that the things around him are transforming:

¹⁷ Or notice

¹⁸ Come into contact, meet, face

¹⁹ Or to evaluate

²⁰ More comprehensively

It is, nonetheless, necessary [to meet, talk, discuss with people], because there does not always have to be a tangible result due to these conversations or discussions. You simply change yourself; and this is what is needed... by means of which the things around you change and the things change altogether. By changing and expanding your thinking, you also improve your country and the world as a whole because we all interact.

In this quotation Rudolfs underlines the transformation of one's thinking, which can occur in meeting people of different cultural background. The starting point to experiencing the changes in the surroundings is a personal transformation. This point can be linked to the aspect presented in the section 5.5, where I argued that the informants' inner change played a central role in experiencing the alterations in relationships to other people.

When I ask Sanita what meaning cultural encounter has in her life, she replies by saying that cultural encounters make her life more exciting because it makes it possible to look at things in a different way, from other people's points of view.

Ina mentions encountering other religious traditions and spiritual practices in her past, which helped her realize how deep-rooted Christianity is in her. The meeting with other traditions and practices helped her understand herself better, "At that time, this experience helped me understand myself better, because until you have not met something very different, it seems to you that you are so accepting, and that is a lie." Furthermore, Ina points out that other cultures and religions help her become more aware of herself, "Other cultures, religions are like a mirror where I can look into and see both myself and others. It helps me be more aware of myself and see others more clearly."

Janis mentions as well that he derives knowledge about wisdom of life, self-understanding, and consciousness from the Vedas and Zen Buddhism. But it is important for him to distinguish between the religious aspect and a wish to understand oneself and the world more profoundly. Janis says that

One thing is to respect one's religious/spiritual tradition, and not to make mixture in relation to the Highest²¹. But to understand the relationships, life, emergence of crises, one's character and cultivation²² of it (...) I cannot acquire it [knowledge] here [in Christian tradition]. And logically you search and look for what and who can provide you with that [knowledge].

²¹ Meaning God, Higher Power

²² Developing, improving of one's character

Furthermore, Janis mentions that encountering other religious traditions has helped him look at several aspects in his own practice of Christian Meditation in a different way, “Other traditions are great because, you can understand various aspects of other traditions in your own tradition.” Janis refers to Laurence Freeman during the interview who says that you grow fond of your homeland after a journey. As I interpret it, other religious traditions and practices enrich Janis’ comprehension and perception of himself, his spiritual development and practice as well as the nature of the world.

The informants experience cultural encounters as a possibility for a personal transformation and a chance to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of themselves and others. Through meeting people of other cultures and other religious traditions they get to know themselves in a more profound way. It is a chance to learn from others and look from other’s point of view. It is experienced as widening of one’s perception of oneself and the world. This conforms to Buber’s theory of dialogue, where he emphasizes that an individual really becomes himself in meeting with other people, through the Thou a person becomes I. According to Buber, we need to meet others in order to meet ourselves, only through others we can see ourselves. Moreover, it can also be seen in light of Rotting’s theory of interreligious learning and the process of passing over and coming back, through which the informants develop a new network of understanding themselves and the other. Panikkar mentions that “very often we only discover the profound meaning of our own world after we have tasted something exotically different.”²³

6.2 The Challenge of Cultural Encounter

I asked the informants what they thought about the challenges they met when encountering other cultures. Most informants refer to meeting other cultures as beneficial and positive, meaning that it encompasses learning and expanding the way they understand themselves. In addition, cultural encounters expand the way of perceiving the world; and they enable one to look at things from a different point of view. However, while interviewing the informants I noticed that many addressed the same challenge of cultural encounter, namely, how to meet other cultures without losing one’s own values, standpoints and cultural characteristics.

When I ask Anna about cultural encounters and how she perceives them, she answers that it is paradoxical, because Anna thinks that is positive that everyone becomes more open

²³ (Panikkar, 1999, p. xviii)

and meets each other, but at the same time she says that she would like cultures to remain with their own characteristics and borders, “I want them to meet, yet, I want each culture to remain with their own... you know, like every person has his/her own beauty. Well, it is hard to explain. I meet contradictions.”

Madara addresses the same challenge. On the one hand she sees cultural encounters as developing - they expand one’s horizons, and make one move out of one’s comfort zone. On the other hand, Madara also expresses worry of losing culture and creating a single “multi-culture”. She wishes for cultures to maintain their margins, so that it is possible to feel the diversity.

The way I see it, the informants describe experiencing ambivalent feelings of wishing to encounter other cultures at the same time it is a fear of losing one’s cultural grounds. Cultural encounters are, on the one hand, generating development for oneself, namely, they enable one to look at things from a different perspective and increase understanding about oneself; on the other hand, they are looked upon as a threat to one’s own roots.

Arturs’ view differs from the opinions, which were expressed above. He believes that cultural encounters and emigration is a challenge – a danger of “ghetto”, danger of secluding oneself and staying closed in one’s own culture, and a threat of extremism. However, he underlines that progress is largely achieved by overcoming national alienations. Arturs experiences the plurality of cultures and cultural encounters as positive in his life. In his opinion, people who communicate in many languages, and who communicate with people of different cultures and who are brought up in more cultures are progressive people, “Those people are often very open to the new trends (...) They are much more open, their thinking is more developed, which is why I think that the cultural encounters are a benefit, not a challenge.”

Rudolfs and Uldis refer to the same challenge of cultural encounters; however, they both describe a similar idea of a possible perspective of how to approach other cultures.

When I ask Rudolfs what cultural encounter means to him, he replies that it is tolerance towards each other, which denotes letting the other be²⁴ as he/she is, at the same time it is a desire to learn from the other without losing one’s own identity. He emphasizes the significance of understanding values and their meaning in different cultures in order to make decisions connected to global politics that are sustainable, thus, preventing conflicts and collisions between cultures. Rudolfs considers globalization as a certain threat to a healthy intercultural interaction:

²⁴ Allowing other cultures to be as they are, tolerating other cultures

Alise: What do you mean by a healthy interaction between cultures?

Rudolfs: As I said... it is tolerance, the ability to listen to the other, take the good from each other without losing one's own identity.

Rudolfs says that cultural encounters are not easy, because there is a great possibility for misunderstandings and coming across something that is in conflict with one's own culture. He underlines the necessity of attempting to see from others' point of view.

When I ask Uldis about how he sees cultures encounter, he addresses the challenge of how to build a dialogue while remaining in one's own position, without leaving it, but to simply be able to talk. He points out that it is a great challenge that is always following the humanity. Uldis points out further that it is important not to allow our interpretations of our own culture, our environment which we live in, and our values to be relative and flexible. He emphasizes that it is important not to diminish our values and not to say that "these are my principles, if you do not like them, I have others; but remain at the core values - grace, justice, and all the other core values of Europe, European civilization." Uldis highlights the aspect of learning to apply these values to a broader context and "see the alternative point of view, try to see yourself from the other position." He adds, however, that it is hard to do.

Both Uldis and Rudolfs emphasize the significance of understanding values and their meaning in different cultures and finding a way to apply them in a broader context, see oneself from the other's position. As I understand, they both refer to finding a common core, shared values in different cultures. Moreover, they both pay attention to the personal initiative – a personal attempt to look at oneself from the other person's point of view.

This conforms to Mall's view of searching for the *overlapping ground* or Eriksen's search for *common cultural denominators* in cultural encounters, which makes communication possible and allows cultures to retain their individual character.²⁵ The search for the overlapping ground, according to Rötting's theory of interreligious learning, involves a personal wish to get engaged in such a quest, meaning that a person needs to be open, willing to learn and ready to be changed by the other. However, it implies also knowing one's own depth and one's own religious/cultural *roots* before entering such a search for the point of contact.

When I ask Indulis Paics what his thoughts about cultural encounter are, he emphasizes that cultural encounter is always difficult. Paics addresses the same issue of how to hear each

²⁵ (Mall, 2000, p. 6)

other and at the same time not to attempt to put it all syncretically together, “How can we remain faithful to where we are²⁶, and at the same time hear and accept others?”

However, Paics says that meditation as a practice of being in silence surrounded more by our questions rather than answers, is one practical way which shows us that at the deepest level we are all human beings; and “maybe exactly in that point - in our desire to explore the world, in our desire to find ourselves - we are all the same. In this way, I think that cultural encounter is the ability to listen to each other.” Paics points out that meditation is one practical way which increases the feeling of belonging to the same world and experiencing interconnectedness with other people.

Meditation in this sense can be understood as a possible overlapping ground or a point of contact in cultural encounters, which inevitably changes the view of oneself and the other.²⁷

6.3 Summary

In discussing the experiences of cultural encounters I have focused on presenting the aspects, which characterize cultural encounter in the informants’ lives. A great emphasis in cultural encounters is placed on a personal meeting between people. Such meetings open the possibility to search for an overlapping ground – a point of contact between people from different cultures. Cultural encounters involve the aspect of dialogue in the informants’ experiences. The informants emphasize individual efforts – working on oneself to develop the necessary qualities and attitudes, which are needed to create a mutual understanding. Dialogue involves a wish to get engaged in contact with the other person and the acceptance of the likelihood to be changed by the other. Cultural encounters are experienced as a chance for a personal transformation and a way to gain a more comprehensive understanding of oneself and others.

Cultural encounters are also perceived as challenging. The greatest challenge addressed by the informants is: how to meet other cultures without losing one’s own standpoints and values. The informants suggest finding a common core, shared values in an intercultural context, which can be understood as a search for a common point of contact or overlapping ground. A necessity to look from the other’s point of view in cultural encounters is also underlined.

²⁶ Our culture, religious tradition.

²⁷ (Rötting, 2007, p. 280)

7 Christian Meditation and Cultural Encounters

In this chapter I will address the research question regarding the subjective meanings of Christian Meditation in cultural encounters. I asked the informants questions regarding Christian Meditation's influence on their relations and attitude towards other cultures and their experiences of cultural encounters in relation to Christian Meditation. I will start with investigating the aspects of what the informants mention gaining due to practising Christian Meditation in the context of cultural encounter. After that, I will concentrate on different aspects of how the informants describe experiencing the impact of Christian Meditation regarding their cultural encounters.

7.1 Tolerance and Acceptance of the Other as a Result of Christian Meditation

Many informants mention becoming more tolerant, open²⁸ and accepting²⁹ of people from other cultures as a result of practising Christian Meditation.

Anna says that she has become more tolerant and open to the different³⁰ as a result of practicing Christian Meditation. She is also not so judgmental of other traditions, "I just understand that each culture has its own traditions and I do not judge so much anymore and say that my tradition is the only right one." Furthermore, Anna means that Christian Meditation is like a catalyst which stimulates and promotes cultural encounters. When I ask her in what way it serves as a catalyst, Anna replies that people who meditate become such people who want to approach other people, because meditation opens people. Furthermore, Anna says that Christian Meditation encourages a greater curiosity towards other cultures in her life. In the past she was rather indifferent to other cultures, but now Anna says that she wants to know more, she wants to experience other cultures on her skin. She mentions having a wish to move abroad for a while, "not to live any longer in my narrow world, but to get out somewhere."

Madara recognizes that she is becoming more understanding, open and encouraging to different points of view due to Christian Meditation. But unlike Anna, Madara stresses that it does not, however, mean that she is seeking more contact or friendship with people from other cultures or having wish to move abroad. Yet, she says that she is not so hostile to the unfamiliar and to the things that she lacks to understand in other cultures.

²⁸ "Atvērts" in Latvian

²⁹ "Pieņemošs" in Latvian

³⁰ "Citāds"- something or somebody that is different

Arturs says that he has become much more tolerant towards other people, including in his relations to other denominations. He used to rather criticize other religious movements and traditions prior to Christian Meditation. Arturs treats people differently now, “I can tell you that today I treat people of different faith with empathy and acceptance.” Moreover, he says that he has become more open regarding the religious dimension due to practising Christian Meditation. Arturs expresses that he has begun to perceive other people such as they are, without judging if they are good or bad, friends or foes, represent a hostile or friendly ideology. He expresses coming to realize that the other person is also looking for love and wants understanding, wants to talk to other people and wants to build a relationship with God. Besides, Arturs emphasizes the ecumenical significance of meditation, “Meditation is a very powerful ecumenical moment, because you learn to deal in a calmer way with people with different views. I think this is the most important thing that I gained through meditation.”

When talking about Christian Meditation’s meaning in her life, Baiba points out that Christian Meditation stimulates her to show more kindness and tolerance towards all people, not only to the ones that she likes. Baiba emphasizes the aspect of love in Christianity as very important in her life, “I remind myself very often of this basic principle that love is the only path. (...) It seems to me that this is the main task of a human, that you treat others with warm feelings.” When I further ask her to elaborate on this aspect of love in her life and how she understands it, Baiba says that “it is very warm and deep feelings for the other person, and that you just accept the person as he/she is.” Yet, she emphasizes that Christian Meditation has not drastically changed her life as Baiba has always treated people positively and with tolerance:

I have always treated people positively, but it [the practice of Christian Meditation] makes me show even more kindness and tolerance to anyone, but I cannot say that it [the practice of Christian Meditation] has very radically changed my life.

When I ask Baiba how Christian Meditation has influenced her relation to other cultures, she points out that through Christian Meditation she has learned to accept the differences and not to judge so categorically, because Baiba understands that things are not always the way they look from the outside, “At the bottom, there are often all sorts of nuances which are not possible to be aware of from the outside.”

Ilva mentions as well that she has gained a greater understanding and tolerance of other cultures. Furthermore, she mentions that meditation teaches one to accept everything. It is a non-belligerent position, and it allows one to accept, see and observe. Christian Meditation is

what allows you not to be harsh and categorical, but calm and observant. Furthermore, like Baiba, Ilva emphasizes love as an important aspect in her life. She says that due to Christian Meditation the feeling of hostility³¹ and anger has disappeared, even if a person acts in a way that she cannot accept:

Love manifests itself in such a way, where you try to solve the case so that it does not end with a feeling that one is a winner and one is a loser. And it is also what meditation teaches - you try to create a situation in such a way that there is no real loser, because where there is a loser, there is absolutely no winner. It is necessary to try to find a solution that does not create a desire to retaliate, to overpower somebody or to act in such a way that shows that you are better... but act in such a way that minimizes any hurt.

The way I understand the quote by Ilva, Christian Meditation increases love, which teaches to accept other people and be attentive to their feelings. Love is a way of life, which has primarily the good of other in mind, and, which Christian Meditation promotes.

When Ina is talking about her experience of encountering different religious traditions, I ask her what meaning Christian Meditation has had in these meeting that she mentions. Ina says that she has learned to perceive others as simply people. She elaborates further that she has learned to accept people with her heart and have genuine compassion for people's suffering. Ina notes that she stopped to think in extreme categories and, like Ilva, accept people's actions, even if they are not always pleasant, "In the past I was maybe externally accepting, but internally it was hard for me to accept, but now I can just accept it [people's actions]." Ina has also become more accepting of people with different religious backgrounds. Ina says that the reason that she can now easily accept people who practise different spiritual practices is because of Christian Meditation's significant role in her life. When Ina mentions the different retreats in which she has participated, she points out that it never used to be so easy to be in other retreats exactly because she had not yet found Christian Meditation. As presented in earlier chapter, Ina experienced rather a conflict with other spiritual practices even if she was actively searching for spirituality and the way to grow spiritually, as she describes it. Ina states that after she started practising Christian Meditation, she is more able to deeply touch a person's soul and the external shape, namely the particular culture or religion, which a person belongs to, has no meaning.

According to what has been expressed above, it is possible to see the tendency that the informants describe gaining the ability to perceive others as simply people without evaluating

³¹ Could also be translated as hatred

or judging them. It is the ability to accept other people as they are, which many informants connect with the concept of tolerance. I see it as a greater capacity to relate to other people, to recognize different views and opinions without being so categorical. Buber underlines that in a genuine dialogue expression of the differences between partners should find a significant place.³² It is a way of accepting that others can think and act differently from oneself. Some informants mention a very profound acceptance of the other. It involves loving and accepting other people with their heart, which they have developed through Christian Meditation. Cultivating acceptance, tolerance and openness can be linked to experiencing Christian Meditation as working on oneself – becoming aware of one’s false self-systems and detaching from them. It can also be connected to the aspect of Christian Meditation as becoming a part of one’s being and ground for one’s activities. Christian Meditation functions as a balance between the outer and the inner life, one’s being and doing. The only true measure of meditation in the Christian tradition, according to Freeman, is, “Am I growing in love?”³³ The fruits of meditation are greater love and compassion, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control, which “grow gradually in us because we begin to turn to the power of love at the centre of our being.”³⁴

7.2 Christian Meditation as Intrareligious Dialogue

Many informants emphasize the significance of silence in encountering people from different cultures. Shared silence is seen as a platform for cultural encounters; and individual meditation practice in silence is experienced as an inner preparatory work to truly and genuinely meet other people. This working on oneself (one’s false self) in the context of cultural encounters can be expressed with Panikkar’s term of “intrareligious dialogue”.

Baiba emphasizes the significance of silence in cultural encounters, when I ask her about the meaning of Christian Meditation in cultural encounters. She says that “being in silence is a form³⁵ that can link³⁶ everybody.” Baiba says that silence can be the unifying element in meeting people from different cultures and religions. When I further ask if she can elucidate on silence as the unifying element and how it unites people, Baiba replies that it is the aspect of “being next to each other”.

³² (Rundquist, 1998, p. 210)

³³ (Freeman, 2013a, pp. 32-33)

³⁴ (Freeman, 2013a, p. 33) (Freeman, 2011, p. 43)

³⁵ It can also be translated as a way

³⁶ Or connect

Secondly, Baiba says that silence in meditation helps her calm down and hear the other person better. Baiba says that it is often in the today's society that we run into each other, but do not really hear what the other person is saying, which results in a fragmented encounter:

You are in your own thoughts thinking about your things. You hear something what the other person is saying, you hear it halfway. Yet, in reality you are already somewhere farther in your thoughts. The other person is doing exactly the same. Then the encounter is fragmented.

Furthermore, Baiba emphasizes that both individual Christian Meditation and shared meditation in silence is what makes one prepared for a dialogue:

You have already prepared for the conversation. You have already taken away all of the thoughts, strings of thoughts. Just like we are making preparations for some major works, I think that Christian Meditation could be that preparatory work [for dialogue].

Meditation's aspect of silence can be seen in Baiba's story as having two functions: (1) shared meditation and being in silence can link everybody and it develops a feeling of community; (2) individual meditation gives a platform to hearing the other person better, be present to the being of the other person.

Arturs highlights silence as a way to truly meet the representatives of other cultures. A true meeting, according to him, can happen when one does not try to logically perceive God, but be present to the mystery of God, which cannot be categorized when meeting other people. However, he underlines that a genuine meeting can occur between people who perceive God in a similar way, namely who acknowledge the incomprehensibility and mystery of God:

Alise: What do you think is the meaning of Christian Meditation in encountering other cultures?
Arturs: The path of Christian Meditation is a way to apophatically comprehend God. We perceive God through what he is not. We perceive him as the original mystery, without trying to logically categorize. And at this meeting in mystery and silence we can truly meet representative of other cultures, who also perceive God in a similar way.

Furthermore, Arturs says that a meeting and dialogue is also listening to God, to the Divine presence and to another person. This conforms with Buber's view on dialogue where in every

meeting with *Thou* the *Eternal Thou* (God) is present,³⁷ “In each Thou we address the eternal Thou.”³⁸

Arturs describes a very profound meeting with another person in silence, where the other person is a Thou. As I see, one needs to recognize the incomprehensibility of the original Mystery, one needs to be in contact with one’s own depth – the true self to truly experience a communion with another person. Thus, silence can be seen as a platform to meet other people, to experience being next to each other, as Baiba describes.

When I ask Ina the following question, “You mentioned that while practising Christian Meditation you came into a closer contact with other religious traditions. What meaning did Christian Meditation have in encountering the different religions and cultures?” Ina says that she does not believe that an external cultural encounter is possible, formally, probably yes, but she says that it is a deep inner process, very intimate, and there is a great necessity to work on oneself in order to accept what is different, “I understand that somewhere in the depths everything is one, but meeting can take place between two souls.” Furthermore, Ina says that it is crucial to be in contact with oneself, with one’s depth in order to truly touch the depth of another person. She notes that it is important to free oneself from external systems and find oneself, “Then you can truly see the other.”

Ina refers to cultural encounters as something very profound between people. This can also be linked to Buber’s *I* and *Thou* relationship, where the meeting between two persons can be experienced but not understood and opens to a genuine change from communication to communion.

A similar view is also expressed by Andrejs. When I ask Andrejs about the meaning of Christian Meditation in encountering other cultures, he replies by saying that meditation is practised in all religions and he thinks that meditation is one of the major factors which can contribute to cultural encounters, because meditation enables the liberation of the soul and spirit to the feeling of pure existence and state. Furthermore, Andrejs describes meditation as removing his egoism, and by removing it, according to him, one experiences love towards the other regardless of colour, social status and job title. That is why he thinks that meditation could have the decisive role in cultural encounters.

Both Ina’s and Andrejs’ experiences can also be seen as becoming aware of and integrating the false self, where meditation has had an active role. Christian Meditation can be seen as an individual working on oneself to engage in a dialogue with another person. In the

³⁷ (Buber, 1937/2004, p. 31)

³⁸ (Buber, 1937/2004, p. 78)

depth of the true self it is possible to experience a deep connection and love towards other people. Meditation, as I see it, helps coming to a realization that “the other person is not my ego, and yet it belongs to my Self,”³⁹ as Panikkar expresses it.

When I ask Uldis, if he could describe how he experiences cultural encounters in his life, he emphasizes that through practising Christian Meditation he has understood that it cannot be true that there are only differences between the various traditions. Uldis says that Christian Meditation as a practice is different, but the direction is very similar in a large number of religious movements. Uldis as mentioned earlier has many friends from different cultures who practise other types of meditation. When I ask Uldis what Christian Meditation means to him in meeting other people in his life, he says that Christian Meditation is a bridge to other people. When he meets and talks to people who have different cultural and religious backgrounds, they often talk about their spiritual practices. Sometimes he does not completely understand what the other person is talking about, then, through practising meditation Uldis starts comprehending what the other person has said to him. Christian Meditation functions as a bridge which helps him interpret or translate other person’s experiences and words into his language. Moreover, he says that there is some unifying factor in the various traditions, and the differences are not so great:

I think that meditation is what makes you abandon the language and connect to the Ultimate Reality⁴⁰. When you do not have a language in the middle between you and that Reality, between you and the other person who is also trying to connect to the Ultimate Reality, then you lose the distinction in some way, because language puts everything in its place, separates and sets apart. It is necessary and we cannot avoid that, but we also should realize the deficiencies of language which provoke conflicts.

The concept Ultimate Reality, which Uldis uses, implies the final and fundamental power in all reality.⁴¹⁴² Uldis’ quote above can be seen in light of Buber’s theory of dialogue where the role of silence is emphasized. For Buber a genuine meeting can happen in silence where much is also left for monologue. Uldis says that meditation helps him start understanding what the other person has said after some meeting. He says that through meditation he can translate what the other person has said to his own language and start perceiving what the other person has talked about. I understand this as an intrareligious dialogue (Panikkar) or monologue (Buber) that Uldis describes. It is not an intrareligious dialogue, which involves only cognitive

³⁹ (Panikkar, 1999, p. xvi)

⁴⁰ Uldis uses this term in English during the interview

⁴¹ ("Ultimate Reality," n.d.)

⁴² In the Abrahamic traditions the Ultimate Reality is called God (Keating, 2008, para. 8).

thinking or reflection, but it is a realization of a deeper connectedness to other people through a personal experience of spiritual practice. As I understand it, when other people share their insights into their practices and their experiences with Uldis, then translating that to his own language through meditation implies experiencing or feeling it. Uldis' experience can also be linked to Christian Meditation as an individual preparatory work to meet other people.

The aspects mentioned by the informants can be seen in light of Panikkar's term of intrareligious dialogue, which is an internal dialogue with oneself and can be triggered by a meeting with Thou, who is not in-different to the I. This kind of dialogue, according to him, is itself a religious act – an act that neither unifies nor stifles but re-links us. Shared silence in cultural encounters can trigger the intrareligious dialogue, through which it is possible to find a unity with other people, which is beyond words, as I see it. Intrareligious dialogue is an inner dialogue, where one struggles with oneself and one's beliefs. Thus, it can also be seen as an interior working on oneself or preparatory work to truly meet others where we “open ourselves and release ourselves from the jail of egotism in order to really be open to the experiences of others.”⁴³ Drawing from Freeman, by becoming aware of their false self-systems and detaching from them, the informants are rising more deeply to their oneness with their true self.⁴⁴ Christian Meditation functions as a bridge to the other person, as Uldis describes it. It is a bridge, which brings people closer to one another, as one gradually realizes that the other is not separate from oneself.⁴⁵

7.3 Existential Cultural Encounter – Dialogue of Life

When I ask the informants about Christian Meditation's influence on how they perceive themselves and other cultures and how they experience the meaning of Christian Meditation in approaching and encountering other cultures, the informants express a deep realization of a profound belonging and participating in the world, as I see it. They illustrate having a sense of being connected to other people and the world in a deeper meaning, which is strongly connected to the practice of Christian Meditation. This aspect conforms to Wayne Teasdale's concept of *dialogue of life*. It is not a conversation about life but an existential realization of being together with other people. Thus, I will further explore this aspect of cultural encounter described by the informants in light of the concept of *dialogue of life*. After this section I will apply Teasdale's concept of *dialogue of heart* to describe the experience of shared meditation in the context of

⁴³ (Panikkar, 1999, pp. xvi-xvii)

⁴⁴ (Freeman, 2007b, p. 8)

⁴⁵ (Freeman, 2013c, p. 16)

cultural encounter. Although *dialogue of life* and *dialogue of heart* are integral and interconnected parts, I attempt to present distinct aspects of both kinds of dialogical experiences, which were described by the informants.

When I ask Paics how Christian Meditation has influenced his relationship with other people, he replies by saying that Christian Meditation demonstrates in a very clear way that what unites us are our common questions. Our answers, however, which are differently formulated, very often divide us, and often are the reason for conflicts. To clarify this formulation, Paics says, “when we realize that we are all human beings, thus have the same unresolved questions, then we meet in silence as people who are searching, who are on the path.”

Moreover, Paics points out that Christian Meditation does not require a tolerant attitude, but by meditating one just comes to a conclusion and realizes that we are all part of one great process. Paics says further that we tend to set ourselves apart and separate us from the rest of the world with our minds by thinking that we are special, that we are different, but it really is not how it is, “at some point you start reflecting that there are people in other cultures and religions, who dress differently, believe differently, act differently, but belong to this world just like you.”

However, Paics notes in the end of the interview, when I ask him if there is anything he wants to add, that “Christian Meditation is not a panacea, it is not a solution for all problems and it most certainly is not the answer to all questions either regarding Christianity or interreligious dialogue.” Paics says that it is one of the stages, eventually important, substantial, but one of.

As I understand Paics’ reply, Christian Meditation helps him come to a realization that everybody is looking for similar experiences and have the same questions; all people are a part of the living reality of human nature.

A similar realization is also present in Oskars experience. During the interview he emphasizes many times the aspect of inner connection or interconnectedness of everything in the world. When I ask Oskars how Christian Meditation has influenced his relation to other cultures, he replies that he would rather say that meditation generally affects the viewpoint and attitude to the world, including other cultures. When I further ask in what way it affects them, Oskars emphasizes the meaning of heart, “You comprehend... you comprehend with your heart that everything in this world is connected - Russian, Latvian, American, English, Arab – what is the difference. (...) Any religion at its core leads to a better, purer person.”

Furthermore, he stresses that everything in the world is connected, that the world is one, whether you are a Buddhist or a Christian.

A significant aspect that the informants express is a deeper feeling of belonging to other people in a common search for God.

When Ilva is talking about her experience and feeling of meditating together with other people, I ask her what meditation with other people in silence means to her in the context of cultural encounter. Ilva replies by saying that Christian Meditation really is a meeting with God. She emphasizes further that it is not important what we call other faiths, everybody is looking for God. She expresses a realization of not being alone on her path, “People try to find themselves and gain peace (...). You realize that you are not alone on your path.”

Janis answers similarly when I ask him about how he experiences the meaning of Christian Meditation in cultural encounters. He mentions realizing that everybody is “moving upwards”. It implies that everybody is searching for God and everybody is on the spiritual search, as I interpret it. Moreover, he says that we do not know what is going on inside other people, but Janis expresses the feeling of going together with other people, “I realize that you are heading upwards and I am also heading upwards. We do not know what is going on inside each of us, but we are going together.”

Ina mentions having a feeling of belonging to other people and searching for God together, when she participated in a Buddhist retreat while practising Christian Meditation. She says that it was a cultural encounter between different traditions, where Ina describes feeling openness, sensitivity and a sense of being one with all the people, “We are all one; we are all people who are searching for God.”

The informants’ experiences of Christian Meditation regarding cultural encounters, can be viewed through Teasdale’s concept of *dialogue of life*. Many informants describe feeling a deep belonging to the world and other people due to the practice of Christian Meditation. This experience conforms to Teasdale, who writes that the dialogue of life is not a conversation about life itself but “existential realization of being together consciously in the process of existence itself.”⁴⁶ It embraces all human experience and all the concerns of human life.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Teasdale emphasizes the role of spiritual life/practice, which is the foundation of finding and revealing a “deeper, more subtle reality that always unites us.”⁴⁸ The informants express a realization of being one with the world and other people and being together with other people

⁴⁶ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 29)

⁴⁷ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 29)

⁴⁸ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 25)

and searching for one God together. It is an experience of deep unity with other people. Through meditation, in silence, through the common questions it is possible to experience the depth of one's being, where one feels "comfort with others in the context of ultimate meaning."⁴⁹ It is a realization of a common reality.

7.4 Dialogue of Heart – Meditation Together

The informants describe Christian Meditation as one of the ways people can meet. Silence is experienced as the unifying element in cultural encounters. Most of the informants attend regularly the common Christian Meditation, which is organized in the church. Many have also had experience of attending retreats in other traditions and meditating together with people with different religious and spiritual backgrounds. In this section I will explore the aspects of common meditation (*dialogue of heart*) in the context of cultural encounters, which the informants describe.

Ina describes how she is actively attending retreats in different spiritual traditions. She mentions participating in Theravada Buddhist retreat and a retreat in the tradition of *Vaishnavism*. Ina mentions experiencing a deep relationship with other people that was formed without words. She describes a feeling of communion without words in silence and a subtle sensitivity to the presence of other people:

I could easily be with Buddhists. We remained silent and at the same time deeply touched each other. It was a silent retreat and then the relationship forms in a very subtle way. People become very sensitive to one another, to the presence of one another. This sensitivity becomes very, very subtle. A communion is formed, even though you do not speak to people. There is sometimes only some eye-gaze⁵⁰ which is exchanged among the [retreat] participants.

This conforms to Teasdale who says that profound bonds develop between participants through shared meditation, and modes of mutual understanding are activated that are frequently not present in more formally academic settings.⁵¹

Ilva, when talking about the frequency of her practice of Christian Meditation, emphasizes the aspect of meditating together with other people. She says that she can experience greater progress in a common meditation. When I further ask Ilva how she experiences the progress, she replies by saying that the changes of processes can only be felt

⁴⁹ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 29)

⁵⁰ Meaning that the eyes meet. It could be also translated as a glimpse or glance of eyes.

⁵¹ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 29)

by the meditator, and that it cannot be explained with words. Yet, I ask Ilva if we can talk more about the common meditation and I ask her if she could describe what she feels while meditating together with other people. Ilva answers that “it is a unity in energy; you feel the power that is in the room.” She describes a session of a morning meditation, where people “meet with the eyes, not with the tongues”, meaning that it is a silent meeting without words. It is described the same as Ina, who mentions a meeting of eyes without talking in the Buddhist retreat. Furthermore, Ilva mentions that shared meditation is a very sustaining⁵² process:

Nobody says, ‘I am supporting you very much.’ It does not happen like that. It is a real action, a common feeling of energy. Everybody is simultaneously in silence, nothing is being done, and you have the feeling that time moves at high speed.

Janis means that people can meet in the discipline of meditation not in the discussion about meditation. He says that it is possible to meditate together with anybody since meditation is present in all major traditions, and while being together in silence there will absolutely be no disagreements. Janis draws from his experience of a shared meditation and describes experiencing a fellowship and relationship with people without words. Yet, he underlines the significance of having meditated a great deal alone, before one is able to feel the relationship with other people being formed without speaking to each other, “If you have meditated intensely enough alone, which is the normal state, then, when you meditate in a group, you feel that relationships with others are forming.”

As I understand it, it is important to have a sufficient experience of meditating alone, meaning that one needs to have gained some insight into what meditation encompasses and implies, and one needs to have looked into oneself (one’s false self) to be able to experience the feeling of forming a silent relationship with other people. Moreover, Janis continues by saying that he feels like he already has relationship with other people after meditating together. It is like “a silent brotherhood [laughs]. It is of course an exaggeration but you feel that you have a relationship with them.” Janis continues the sentence by pointing out that when one has meditated together with some person and meets that person on the street and says hello, “it is clear that you are not building a relationship at that time, for you already have it and you just implement⁵³ it on the street.” Furthermore, Janis goes on and recalls the first time he meditated together with other people who practise Christian Meditation. Janis says that after the group

⁵² Connected to the word “power” or “strength” in Latvian language, meaning that the process of a common meditation gives Ilva the strength.

⁵³ Meaning that you put the relationship into effect, or realize or apply it

meditation he had a feeling that it was easier to meditate and that it seemed like he was taking great steps forward⁵⁴, “You do not go anywhere, though, we are on a wave.” At the same time, Janis mentions also some times when it was very hard to meditate. He connects it to the shared energy in the meditation room, meaning that the attitude and mood of people who come to meditate together is significant in the group meditation.

According to Buber, a genuine dialogue can happen in silence, but the physical attitude of the one to the other is essential.⁵⁵ The aspects that Janis mentions are similar to the ones that Ilva refers to. She highlights as well the power of the common energy when meditating together and the progress that she experiences from the group meditation.

Oskars underlines the role of silence in cultural encounters. When I ask him what he thinks the meaning of Christian Meditation is in cultural encounters, Oskars answers that silence is one for everybody and God is one for everybody, “Maybe there is an Arab whose language I do not understand. I cannot verbally communicate with him, but in silence we can meditate together, without any problems. It is an understanding without words.” As mentioned earlier Oskars has an experience of different spiritual practices and he also attends Buddhist retreats. Oskars emphasizes that in order to understand each other without words people need to be on a similar level of development. When I further ask him to explain what he means by that, Oskars replies that those are vibrations and energy that creates this mutual understanding. According to him, people involved in creating such relationship must have similar interests. As I understand it, a silent relationship is a mutual process and both people need to be prepared and willing to create this relationship. In addition, similar interests and a similar spiritual practice are necessary in order to succeed.

The experience of the informants described above can be seen in light of Teasdale’s concept of *dialogue of heart*. Teasdale emphasizes the role of a shared common spiritual practice in cultural encounters where it brings intimacy, a contemplative communion, a profound awareness of community that makes the participants feel closer together in affection and expectation of their shared efforts. Teasdale states that these deep encounters make the work of interfaith encounter and interreligious dialogue valuable and fruitful in the way further to deeper understanding and awareness of other traditions.⁵⁶ Also Panikkar underlines that silence is not a full-fledged model for intercultural and interreligious meetings, but “only a

⁵⁴ Janis used an expression in Latvian which directly can be translated as taking great steps forward, meaning that he felt a great progress when meditating together with other people.

⁵⁵ (Buber, 1947/2002, p. 4)

⁵⁶ (Teasdale, 2004, p. 29)

canvas on which other models can be situated.”⁵⁷ A common practice shared in silence can be seen as adding a valuable dimension to intercultural encounters and a further understanding of other traditions. As encountered in the informants’ experiences, these profound meetings create a sense of community. They are also experienced as a process of building a silent relationship with others. However, a mutual willingness to engage in such an activity and one’s attitude towards the other are crucial.

7.5 A Meeting between Different Spiritual Practices within a Person

Another aspect, described by several informants, is a meeting between different spiritual practices in one and the same person. I have chosen to approach it as a cultural encounter within a person. Christian Meditation serves for these informants as a way to unify the different practices.

Some informants actively engage in other spiritual practices while practising Christian Meditation. The different traditions and practices are not experienced as conflicting, rather as supplementing each other.

Baiba, beside Christian Meditation, is also actively practising yoga, which involves saying mantras in the Eastern tradition and a meditative process in the end of each session. She mentions her practising yoga only in the end of the interview, because she does not experience it as a great cultural encounter. Baiba says that in principle concepts in both practices are very similar, “It is slightly different, but they [yoga practitioners], through the body practice, come to the same things.” Furthermore, she feels that practicing yoga complies with her chosen path, namely Christian Meditation. Baiba says they complement each other very well, because in yoga one also has to release the mind and one must be present here and now. This, according to Baiba, is similar in both practices, but the methods are different. She mentions that in the end of a yoga session there is also a meditative process, which allows Baiba to implement the tradition of meditation in another way. Baiba experiences both traditions as a harmonious flow of life, and that both practices are parts of her life, “I do not have any collisions [between both practices]. I do not have to break anything inside me to go there.” However, she points out that the yoga she is practising does not include a particularly strong aspect of philosophy. It is a practice of body for her, yet, meditative, since one can meditate in different ways, according to Baiba.

⁵⁷ (Panikkar, 1999, p. 22)

When I ask Ina what Christian Meditation means to her, one of the aspects she emphasizes is that Christian Meditation is a way for her to unite the different religions and cultures, which she experiences as parts of her. Prior to the practice of Christian Meditation, she belonged to a specific Christian denomination⁵⁸. Yet, Ina was engaged in spiritual practices and embraced spiritual tools in non-Christian traditions. She experienced a conflict between her Christian belief and interest in other spiritual and religious traditions. She says that she felt fragmented:

Christian Meditation is a way for me to unify the different religions and cultures within myself, which are found inside me. In the past, when I was a part of my Christian denomination, I felt I had to give up Buddhism, reiki, I-Ching, and yoga. And I honestly tried to do it, but it only fragmented me. It was not the right way. Christian Meditation is a path to the depth inside me where it all connects, or has not yet separated⁵⁹.

Christian Meditation helps Ina unify the different traditions within herself. She says that through Christian Meditation “one becomes aware of all that is inside oneself”. In her case it was the different spiritual practices, which she tried to give up, but could not. Ina says that Christian Meditation expands one’s consciousness, “on some level of consciousness there is no longer a conflict between religions and the different experiences.”

Madara, in addition to Christian Meditation, practises qigong and yoga, which both, according to her, automatically include meditation. She says that she does not see a great difference between these meditation practices. For Madara it is a path to herself and “to God or Cosmos or energy, however one calls it”. When I further ask her, what it means to her that she combines the different traditions/practices, Madara says that it unequivocally is development. It expands one’s perspective⁶⁰, because it makes one leave one’s comfort zone and achieve something unexpected in a way different from how it is prescribed in everyday life, “I guess it is a greater reliance on the structure of the world. The world structure is the same for different cultures, but the expressions are different.” In the end of the interview, Madara adds that she was searching for her answers through many traditions and practices, but through Christian Meditation she came to the conclusion that everything is united and the source is the same. As mentioned earlier, Christian Meditation is the possibility For Madara to be “vis-à-vis with the source”.

⁵⁸ I am excluding the specific denomination to protect the anonymity of the informant

⁵⁹ Or segregated

⁶⁰ Range of experience, perception

Oskars practises Christian Meditation, nevertheless, he also attends Buddhist retreats. He does not experience both meditation practices as conflicting. Oskars says that meditation in Theravada Buddhism and Christian Meditation are very similar. He does not wish to draw a line between both meditation practices:

I think that everything in the world is connected, and all the directions [religious traditions] are only the subjective view of that direction which imposes the order, which it advocates. But the order of things is the same for everybody – for a Buddhist, a Christian or an atheist.

The informants, as presented in Chapter four, went a long way to come to Christian Meditation. For most informants the path was connected to trying different spiritual practices. As I see it, several informants have come to a conclusion that the different spiritual practices are not in conflict with one another in their lives. They use different words (source, result, order, God) to describe that the goal is the same in various spiritual practices, but the methods differ. Being engaged in other spiritual practices, in addition to Christian Meditation, is experienced as expanding one's horizon and consciousness. Christian Meditation makes it possible to embrace the various spiritual practices. The experiences described by the informants can be understood in light of interreligious learning theory, in which the informants attempt to find a point of contact between the different practices within themselves. It includes the aspect of an inner (intrareligious) dialogue within oneself, which brings about a transformation and a new understanding of one self and the other. Such process changes the way one perceives the world, which is also visible in the informants' stories.

7.6 Summary

The informants describe becoming more open, accepting and tolerant towards people of other cultures. It is the ability to accept and love others as they are, without judging and categorizing them. This aspect can be connected to Christian Meditation functioning as the ground for one's outer activities.

The informants underline the significance of silence in cultural encounters. Two aspects are emphasized: (1) Shared meditation and being in silence develops a feeling of community. (2) Individual meditation is understood as an inner work on oneself in order to meet other people. It involves becoming aware of one's false self-systems. Working on oneself in the context of cultural encounter can be expressed with Panikkar's term of "intrareligious dialogue", which is experienced as an inner dialogue triggered by a meeting with Thou of

different culture/religion. Through this profound internal dialogue, it is possible to experience a deeper connection and love towards others; it is a realization of a unity with other people.

I have presented two types of dialogues regarding cultural encounters in the informants' lives: dialogue of life and dialogue of heart. Dialogue of life is experienced as a deep existential realization of belonging to the world and other people. It is not a conversation, but an awareness induced by the practice of Christian Meditation. Dialogue of heart is connected to the experience of a shared meditation. Shared spiritual practice develops a sense of community and a silent relationship with other people involved in the particular meditation.

Cultural encounter is also experienced within a person as a meeting between different spiritual practices. Christian Meditation has helped the informants to find a way to combine different traditions in their lives without experiencing them as conflicting.

8 Conclusion

In the following sections I will summarize the main findings of the analytical chapters four, five, six and seven. It follows with closing remarks. The overall subject of this study is Christian Meditation and cultural encounters in the lives of Christian meditators in Latvia. Through interviewing 14 people who daily practise Christian Meditation, I have attempted to explore the subjective experiences of Christian Meditation and cultural encounters, as well as the meaning of Christian Meditation in cultural encounters.

The research questions have been as follows:

1. What are the motives which encouraged the informants to start practising Christian Meditation?
2. How do Christian meditators interpret their experience of Christian Meditation?
3. How do Christian meditators interpret their experience of encountering other cultures?
4. How do the informants experience the meaning of Christian Meditation in encountering other cultures, including people with different cultural background and spiritual practices with a basis in another culture?

8.1 Chapter 4: The Path to Christian Meditation

My material suggests that the informants have had different motivations to get involved in Christian Meditation. Nevertheless, for the majority the starting point on their path to Christian Meditation was not strongly connected to one religious tradition. One of the central reasons, specified by the informants, is the state atheism in the Soviet times, which influenced their attitude to religion in their earlier life. In spite of this context, the informants express having an inner feeling and intuitive need for spirituality that brought them to Christian Meditation.

- *The majority of the informants experienced a conflict with a non-Christian meditation practice prior to Christian Meditation.*

The need for a personal experience and a way to spiritually grow was present in the search through the different traditions. However, most informants could not fully include the non-Christian meditation practices and other spiritual tools in their lives. The Christian content and tradition, which Christian Meditation is built upon, was of central significance to the informants in order to get involved in this practice. The informants were in need of a method, which could unite their necessity for an individual spiritual experience/practice and Christian

content. I argue that Christian Meditation for the informants is a way to “come home”, where both of these needs are met.

- *The search for oneself and peace within oneself were significant motives in the majority of the informants’ experiences.*

It was a need to gain a deeper understanding of oneself, where the need for peace and silence are experienced as central on the way to self-encounter. I use Rubenis’ theoretical perspectives to illustrate the important role of the quest for finding oneself and finding peace within oneself in Christian Meditation.

- *The informants emphasize the necessity of experiencing a “stumbling stone” (Rohr) in order to turn to a meditation practice.*

The majority of the informants have had an experience of suffering, economical or spiritual crisis, difficulties or loss of a close person, which motivated them to search for answers to their difficult experiences and make sense of their suffering. Here I refer to Rohr and Keating, who both emphasize the necessity of suffering in order to destabilize one’s ego in order to come to the true self.

8.2 Chapter 5: Christian Meditation in the Informants’ Lives

Christian Meditation is difficult in the beginning, but after integrating it into one’s daily routine Christian Meditation becomes a part of one’s being and one’s life. It implies an inner need to meditate and the experience of its natural and fundamental place in their lives.

- *Christian Meditation is experienced as a path to oneself, which involves several aspects:*
 - 1) The first that the informants note in the initial phase of meditation is *the awareness of oneself*. It involves becoming more aware of the processes, which take place inside oneself and seeing one’s negative sides. This process can be linked to the term of self-knowledge (Keating). To illustrate a greater awareness of oneself, the theory of true and false self (Keating, Rubenis) is applied, which can be seen as unloading the parts of the false self-systems.

- 2) The next step of meditation is *the experience of witnessing oneself* – one’s particular distress: thoughts, emotions, ideas. The informants describe becoming aware of the particular distress, witnessing it and then letting it go. To illuminate this experience I have used theories provided by Rohr, Freeman, and Wilber.
- 3) Christian Meditation is experienced as *working on oneself*. This work involves dealing with the unconscious motivations and desires – one’s false self.
- 4) The aspect of *accepting oneself* is underlined by the majority of the informants. It is connected to accepting and embracing oneself after one has encountered and become aware of one’s dark sides – false self. It can be linked to Freeman’s view on meditation as a middle path.

Relationship with God is central in the informants’ stories. Coming closer to oneself, one’s true self, through meditation, is experienced as coming closer to God. To illuminate this aspect, I have referred to Rubenis and Keating.

- *Christian Meditation is experienced as an anchor in the informants’ lives, meaning that it gives the stability and a greater capacity to handle stressful situations.*

This aspect is described by gaining a greater *focus on the present moment, inner peace and balance between outer and inner world*, between one’s being and doing. Christian Meditation is experienced as a ground for how one approaches the outer life.

- *The informants experience an inner change due to Christian Meditation, thus influencing their relationships.*

In their relationships with other people, the informants mention gaining calmness and greater attentiveness to other people. These aspects are connected to being present and listening to another person. The informants describe letting go of relationships after they started practising Christian Meditation. It is connected to encountering of their shadow sides – false self. In order to illuminate these aspects I have used Freeman’s view on inner change. The changes in their relationships have a direct connection to their inner transformation due to Christian Meditation.

8.3 Chapter 6: Experiences and Challenges in Cultural Encounters

- *The informants underline the significance of a personal meeting in cultural encounters. Such meetings promote inner transformation and change.*

Basing on Rötting's theory of interreligious learning, I argue that such meetings open the possibility to search for overlapping ground – a point of contact. Personal meetings give a chance for I and Thou relationship (Buber) to arise.

- *Cultural encounters in the informants' lives involve the aspect of dialogue, which involves mutual exchange and achieving a mutual understanding. It is a meeting between I and Thou.*

Dialogue is understood as more than just a conversation. It involves individual efforts – working on oneself to develop the necessary qualities in order to truly meet the other person. Cultural encounters involve a wish to approach other person, it is an aspiration to understand the other (Levinas) and accept the likelihood to be changed by the other (Teasdale).

- *Cultural encounters enable the informants to gain a more comprehensive understanding of themselves and others.*

It is connected to gaining a chance to look at oneself from other's point of view and learning from others. I link it to Buber's theory of dialogue, where Buber states that only through others we see ourselves. In light of Rotting's theory of interreligious learning, I argue that through finding a point of contact, a new network of understanding themselves and the other is developed.

- *The informants describe experiencing ambivalent feelings regarding cultural encounters: they wish to encounter other cultures, at the same time, they are afraid of losing one's cultural grounds.*

A possible model for approaching other cultures, presented by several informants, is to know one's own ground, but not to be afraid of mutual exchange. It entails the ability to look from the other person's point of view and to apply one's values to a broader context. This model can be linked to searching for overlapping ground – a point of contact (Rötting) or common cultural denominators (Eriksen). Such quest requires willingness to learn from the other and be ready to be changed by the other.

8.4 Chapter 7: Christian Meditation and Cultural Encounters

- *The informants describe becoming more open, accepting and tolerant towards people of other cultures as a result of Christian Meditation.*

It is connected to perceiving others without evaluating or judging them, accepting others as they are, without being so categorical. I argue that it is a greater capacity to relate to other people and recognize the differences. Gaining these qualities can be linked to experiencing Christian Meditation as a constant working on oneself, where one becomes more aware of one's dark sides, one's false self-systems and where one attempts to let go of them by detaching oneself from them. The fruits of meditation grow slowly within oneself as one turns to the power of love at the centre of one's being.⁶¹

- *In the context of cultural encounters, the informants experience Christian Meditation as an individual preparatory work to truly meet other people.*

Many informants emphasize the significance of silence in meditation when encountering people of different cultural background. Shared silence opens the possibility to experience a community with another person. However, individual meditation is needed to truly and genuinely meet the other, to experience the other as belonging to one-Self (Panikkar). I argue that in this context Christian Meditation is experienced as a preparatory work within oneself, which can be seen in light of Panikkar's concept of intrareligious dialogue. It is an internal dialogue, in which it is possible to discover a unity with other people.

- *By practicing Christian Meditation the informants describe two forms of dialogue – dialogue of life and dialogue of heart – which they have experienced in the context of cultural encounters.*

I use Teasdale's theoretical perspectives to illuminate these experiences. Dialogue of life is experienced as a deep existential realization of being together with other people in the process of existence itself (Teasdale). It is experienced as a deep belonging to the world and to other people, where the informants feel being together with others in a common search for God. Christian Meditation as a spiritual practice has a profound meaning in developing a sense of belonging to other people and the world. Dialogue of heart is experienced in a shared spiritual practice in cultural encounters. The informants describe a sense of community and intimacy

⁶¹ (Freeman, 2013a, p. 33)

arising from such meetings, which makes the participants feel closer to one another (Teasdale). Both forms of dialogue are experienced as deeply integral and interconnected.

- *Christian Meditation serves as a way to unify different spiritual practices within a person.*

Prior to discovering Christian Meditation, the informants experienced a conflict with another spiritual tradition. However, after finding it, Christian Meditation has allowed them to combine different spiritual practices without experiencing them as conflicting. This aspect is seen in light of Rötting's theory of interreligious learning process. I argue that the informants, by finding a point of contact between the different spiritual practices and experiencing intrareligious dialogue, generate a new understanding of themselves and others.

8.5 Closing Remarks

The core of one's spiritual life, according to Merton, is to become more deeply centred in one's true self.⁶² In order to do that one needs to "die to oneself", experience a radical letting go of one's false self by detaching oneself from it and transcending it.

The informants' experience shows that Christian Meditation contributes to forming a sense of community and belonging to other people in a profound way. It promotes an experience of a deep interconnectedness with the world. Christian Meditation gradually leads to oneness with one's true self, thus to a realization that the other person is not one's ego, yet it belongs to one Self.⁶³ By continuously detaching themselves from their false selves, Christian Meditation begins to serve as the ground for the informants' approach to the exterior world. The informants' personal experiences indicate that the contemplative dimension is a fundamental element on the path to creating a more profound understanding of other cultures. Christian Meditation enables one to not only try to understand the other culture and the other person, but to truly feel them as connected to oneself. The contemplative dimension in cultural encounters brings a great profoundness. It is a process of finding the other in ourselves where one's "I" does not exist without a "you".⁶⁴

⁶² (Sandman, 2000, The Fruits of Centering Prayer section, para. 4)

⁶³ (Panikkar, 1999, p. xvi)

⁶⁴ (Panikkar & Barr, 1995, p. 101)

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Appendix

Interview Guide: English

1. Introductory questions

- Background information (Education, age).
- Religion/denomination
- Religious/cultural environment in which you grew up (connection to religion prior to Christian Meditation)
- How long have you practiced meditation?
- How often do you meditate?
- How did you find your way to Christian Meditation? (Person, event, book)

2. Meditation Experience

- What meaning does meditation have in your life?
- How has meditation influenced your attitude to yourself?
- How has Christian Meditation influenced your relationships to other people in your life?
- How has Christian Meditation changed your attitude towards other cultures?

3. Intercultural meetings

- How do you experience cultural encounters in your life?

(What is a cultural encounter for you? What do you think about the different cultures meeting?)

- What does the encounter with other cultures mean for you personally?
- How have you experienced it? (specific situations)

4. Meaning of Christian Meditation in cultural encounters

- How has Christian Meditation influenced your attitude/relation towards other cultures?
- Now that you practise Christian meditation, how do you experience cultural encounters? How have you experienced it? (specific incidents/situations)
- How else have you experienced the meaning of Christian meditation in cultural encounters in your life?

5. Final questions

- Is there anything else you want to add?

Interview Guide: Latvian

1. Ievadjautājumi

- Informācija par cilvēku (izglītība, vecums)
- Reliģiskā piederība/konfesija
- Saskarsme ar citām kultūrām/reliģijām bērnībā/jaunībā?
- Cik ilgi Jūs nodarbojaties ar meditāciju?
- Cik bieži Jūs meditējat?
- Vai Jūs varat mazliet pastāstīt par to kā nonācāt līdz kristīgajai meditācijai?

2. Meditācija un kultūru satikšanās

- Ko Jums nozīmē kristīgā meditācija?
- Kā kr. meditācija ietekmēja attiecības pašam ar sevi?
- Kā kr. meditācija ietekmēja attiecības ar citiem cilvēkiem jūsu dzīvē?

3. Kultūru satikšanās

- Kā Jūs izjūtat kultūru satikšanos jūsu dzīvē?
(Kas Jūsaprāt ir kultūru satikšanās? Jūsu domas par kultūru satikšanos?)
- Ko Jums personīgi nozīmē kultūru satikšanās?
- Kā Jūs to esat piedzīvojis? (konkrētas situācijas/notikumi)

4. Kristīgās Meditācijas nozīme kultūru satikšanās

- Kā kr. meditācija ietekmēja attieksmi/attiecības ar citām kultūrām?
- Praktizējot kristīgo meditāciju, kā Jūs izjūtat kultūru satikšanos? Kā Jūs to esat izjutis (konkrētas situācijas/notikumi)
- Kā vēl Jūs esat izjutis Kristīgās Meditācijas nozīmi kultūru satikšanās procesā?

5. Nobeiguma jautājumi

- Vai ir vēl kaut kas, ko Jūs vēlējāties piebilst?

Request to Participate in an Interview: English

My name is Alise Šķupele. I am currently studying "Cultural Encounters" at the Volda University College in Norway. This year I am going to write a master thesis. The topic, which I want to explore, is "Christian Meditation and Cultural Encounters".

My research goal is to understand how people who are practicing Christian Meditation experience cultural encounters. In order to be able to investigate it, I would like to interview people who daily practice Christian Meditation in Latvia.

All data collected during the interviews will be confidential and will be made anonymous. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you can at any time withdraw your consent to participate in the study without giving any reason.

My study depends on your response. Thank you in advance for your help! You can contact me via email skupele@gmail.com, or you can call me on +47 45082830

Best regards,
Alise Šķupele

Request to Participate in an Interview: Latvian

Sveiki! Mani sauc Alise Šķupele. Pašlaik studēju maģistrantūrā "Kultūru satikšanās" Voldas augstskolā Norvēģijā. Šajā mācību gadā man ir jāraksta maģistra darbs. Tēma, kuru vēlos pētīt ir „Kristīgā meditācija un kultūru satikšanās”.

Mans pētījuma mērķis ir saprast, kā cilvēki, kas praktizē kristīgo meditāciju, izjūt kultūru satikšanos. Lai varētu to saprast, vēlos nointervēt cilvēkus, kas ikdienā nodarbojas ar kristīgo meditāciju Latvijā.

Visi ievāktie dati ir konfidenciāli un tiks anonimizēti.

Piedalīšanās pētījumā ir brīvprātīga, un Jūs jebkurā brīdī varat atsaukt savu piekrišanu piedalīties pētījumā, nesniedzot nekādu pamatojumu.

Mans pētījums ir atkarīgs no Jūsu atsaucības, tādēļ jau iepriekš no sirds pateicos par palīdzību!
Ar mani var sazināties pa epastu skupele@gmail.com vai tel. +47 45082830

Ar cieņu,
Alise Šķupele