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How Children Describe the Fruits of Meditation

Noel Keating

Independent Researcher; nkeating@eircom.net

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Abstract: Using an interdisciplinary approach and a phenomenological, hermeneutic, mystagogical methodology, this paper explores how children describe the deep fruits of meditation in their lives. Seventy children, aged 7 to 11, from four Irish primary schools were interviewed; all had engaged in meditation as a whole-school practice for at least two-years beforehand. The study sought to elicit from children their experience, if any, of the transcendent in meditation. It concludes that children can and do enjoy deep states of consciousness and that meditation has the capacity to nourish the innate spirituality of the child. It highlights the importance of personal spiritual experience for children and supports the introduction of meditation in primary schools.

Keywords: meditation; children; spirituality; silence; benefits; fruits; nourish; true-self

1. Introduction

This study was inspired by my personal practice of meditation and my growing awareness of its deep spiritual fruits. While personal experience can be a source of bias, it can also be a strength because, as (Gadamer 1989, p. 9) points out, as our prejudices become apparent to us, they can also become the focus of questioning in their own turn. Having worked in the education sector for forty years as a teacher, principal and education officer, I had observed the spread of mindfulness in Irish primary schools, and while I regarded that as a welcome development, I was concerned that teachers and children were not being alerted to its potential spiritual fruits. I began a Meditation with Children Project based on the practice of silent meditation in the Christian tradition; this is now running in 150 primary schools in Ireland and involves about 32,000 children who meditate at least twice each week on a whole-school basis, on average for one-minute per year of age. I wish to acknowledge from the outset that the context of any research inevitably informs its findings and that this research is set in the particular cultural context of the modern and increasingly secular Irish state.

The practical benefits of meditation and mindfulness have been well explored in academic research (Thompson and Gauntlett-Gilbert 2008; Campion and Rocco 2009; Campion 2011; Hennelly 2011; Hölzel et al. 2011; Boccia et al. 2015; Buttle 2015; Crescentini et al. 2016). By comparison there has been little or no research that explores the participants' perception of its deeper spiritual fruits. While (De Souza et al. 2014) did undertake a small research project in a single Australian primary school to examine the impact of meditation on the children's relationship with God, its conclusions were very tentative suggesting that the practice 'appears to enhance children's sense of and relationship with God.' This study, which is informed by literature from the fields of spirituality, psychology, contemplative psychology, integral theory and Christian mysticism sought to discover to what extent (if any), and how, do children benefit spiritually from the practice of whole-school meditation. I also sought to give a voice to the children's experience of the practice and its fruits in their own words.

2. Children's Spirituality

According to Sheldrake (2007), the word 'spirituality' began to appear in common usage in its modern understanding only after the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965). Like other abstract terms such as 'beauty,' the term 'spirituality' is not an easy term to define. But it may be

construed as an inner drive to live an authentic life, a drive that finds expression in all religious traditions—theistic and non-theistic—and none. Many people today choose to describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious; in other words, while they seek to gain insights into the meaning of life and what it means to live an authentic life, they do so outside the context of any faith affiliation—while they may see themselves as seekers of truth, they are not committed to any institutionalised religion. Such an approach resonates with the expression 'primordial spirituality' which Waaijman (2004) used to refer to the type of spirituality which "belongs to the basic processes of human existence . . . beyond or prior to the type of spirituality as it is institutionalised" in the religions of the world. There is a widespread acceptance today within the academic study of spirituality (Schneiders 2003; Frohlich 2007) and other disciplines (Cook 2013) that spirituality is a natural human predisposition, an innate and dynamic human trait. Yet, until recent decades, it was commonly accepted that spirituality required a well-developed cognitive capacity and hence lay beyond the reach of young children (Nye 2009). However, it is now widely accepted within the field of children's spirituality that children do have an innate capacity for spirituality which manifests itself in spiritual experiences in the course of their ordinary, everyday lives (Hay and Nye 1998; Adams et al. 2008; Adams 2009; Adams et al. 2015), even if they may lack the ability to adequately verbalise their experience. Rahner argues that children's spirituality arises from within, from their own existence and experience, and is enlivened by their capacity for 'infinite openness' (Hinsdale 2001). Hay and Nye (1998) proffer that children experience spirituality as profoundly relational, identifying 'relational consciousness' as a core characteristic of children's spirituality—in other words, children have an innate capacity for relationship which is the foundation of their relationship with themselves, with others, with all of creation and with God. Other characteristics include a capacity for joy, wonder and awe, an aptitude for imaginative wondering and a desire for identity, meaning and purpose—see Hart (2003, p. 10), Champagne (2003, p. 44), Hyde (2008), Giesenberg (2007, p. 259), Bone (2007, p. 229–30), Adams (2010, p. 13), and Hay and Nye (1998). While children's spirituality develops in stages, their engagement with it and expression of it in the modern secular world begins to decline in the early teenage years as it becomes "obscured, overlaid or even repressed by socially constructed processes" that contradict it (Hay and Nye 1998). My research suggests that meditation has the capacity to counter this tendency.

The understanding of spirituality underpinning this research is related to the concept of the true-self. Both psychology and spirituality speak of the false-self and the true-self, although their understandings of the terms are not entirely congruent. Thomas Merton sees the discovery of the true-self as an experience of finding God deep within the centre of the human person. He described it as follows: 'Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being . . . [which] is totally different from the experience of self-consciousness' (Merton 1968). When we experience this form of conscious awareness, it is not merely psychological insight but an *experiential insight* into our participating in Being itself; in this state of consciousness we no longer see ourselves as objects but as participants in Being. In this study, children's spirituality is understood as an emerging, albeit sometimes obscure, inner awareness of one's true-essence, of the true-self. Such awareness is perceptual, as distinct from conceptual, knowledge (De Wit 1991); while conceptual knowledge can be captured accurately and adequately in language, perceptual knowledge cannot; it recognises that the word is not the thing it describes and seeks to know things as they are, whole in themselves, as distinct from the words and concepts that can so easily become their substitutes.

Wilber (2006) and Combs (2009) were the first to distinguish clearly between the *stages* of growth of human consciousness and *states* of consciousness. Beyond the three standard states of consciousness (waking, dreaming and deep sleep), regular meditation leads to a growing awareness of ever subtler states of consciousness. Their distinction helps to explain how it is that children can access very deep states of spiritual consciousness even with limited cognitive development. While their growth through the *stages* of consciousness depends on their age, life experience and education, *they can encounter temporary deep states of consciousness at any age and any stage*. Stages can only be experienced like steps on

a ladder, one after the other; and, generally speaking, having reached a stage it becomes a permanent acquisition - one rarely loses the capacities that accompany it. But states work differently: one can experience a very deep spiritual state at any age but it will be a temporary experience; unlike stages, states never become a permanent acquisition. Meditation gives rise to such temporary states. As we meditate, in the gap between thoughts, one's state of consciousness is briefly altered and deepened, even though the self-conscious mind will not be aware of it at the time (Bourgeault 2016; Ross 2014). This model helps us to understand that while children may access deeply spiritual experiences through the practice of meditation their capacity to give expression to that experience will be limited by their age and their general stage of consciousness (including their cognitive and language development as children). If they seek to describe their experience, their child-like verbal expression will be appropriate to their age; it may therefore be interpreted by adults as irrational but may in fact be trans-rational, an occurrence described by Wilber (2006, p. 51) as the pre/trans fallacy. This may also be a factor which contributes inadvertently to the suppression of children's innate spirituality as they enter their teenage years.

3. Methodology

The study is set in the context of a critical realist paradigm. Positioned between the twin poles of positivism and constructionism, critical realism argues that the general process of science is applicable in both the natural and human/social sciences but accepts that the particular characteristics of the social world place inevitable limits on that process (Mingers 2006). Accordingly, critical realism incorporates a realist ontology and a relative epistemology. Within this paradigm, the study utilises the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology of Van Manen (2014), which seeks to uncover the essence of an experience, helping the reader to 'see' the deeper significance, or meaning structures, of the lived experience it describes. Because this study sought to explore how the practice of meditation impacted on the *spirituality* of children, the methodology was adapted to include a mystagogical approach which called for the researcher to be alert to the potential movement of the spirit in the participants (Waaijman 2002). This research, then, employs a hermeneutic, phenomenological, mystagogical methodology.

Nixon (2013) is one of many who explore the ethical issues of research involving children; this study was designed to balance children's rights to participation with their rights to protection from harm and exploitation. Informed consent was sought from both the parents and children; in addition, child-protection measures were designed which included how potential disclosures from children would be handled if they arose. In addition, research with children calls for great reflexivity on the part of the researcher to ensure that the views of the children are enabled to emerge, free of any potential bias of the researcher.

The study engaged with seventy children, aged from 7 to 12 years old, across four primary schools, three of which were denominational and were participating in the meditation with children project; the fourth was a non-denominational school which had implemented a form of whole-school guided meditation for eight years, independent of the project. Each child was interviewed twice, about three weeks apart and for thirty minutes or so each time. Given the challenge of describing perceptual experience in words—and the additional challenge children face because of their limited cognitive and language abilities—one needs to attend very carefully and attentively to the non-verbal—one must be *fully present with and attentive* to the child (Hay and Nye 1998), Clark (2011) and *be responsive* to their non-verbal language throughout the conversations.

In the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, the process of analysis seeks to mine the data in order to reveal its essence and its meaning in terms of the lived experience of the research participants. As a first step, a transcript of each interview was painstakingly prepared and each transcript was read several times so that the researcher could immerse himself in the data. The aim, as in empathic listening, was to enter as fully as possible into the frame of reference of each child. The approach taken in this study mirrors the detailed, line-by-line approach suggested by van Manen; each sentence

was examined to see what it reveals about the nature of the phenomenon and coded accordingly. Every significant phrase used by each child was coded in MAXQDA, generally in vivo; inevitably, the coding was also influenced by the literature review, the process of preparing for the interviews and the mystagogic approach to the study. The coding of the data in this way is not a necessary step in phenomenology but was undertaken as an additional first step in this case because of the large number of participants. The use of the software enabled this researcher to identify significant thematic expressions that seemed to reveal something of the essence of the experience and its fruits and to link similar expressions together through the in vivo coding, often in the children's own words. It enabled the researcher to search the data with ease and keep track of emerging themes more easily across the interview transcripts. It is important to stress that the coding was done by the researcher, not by the software, which served merely to help keep the data organised and searchable. The thematic analysis undertaken was both sequential and iterative; each step informed and influenced every other in a cyclical, hermeneutic process. This back and forth movement between the individual transcripts, the reflective journal and the themes emerging from the study as a whole continued until the analysis was complete. In this way, meanings emerging from the data were constantly tested for their plausibility and their validity.

Van Manen points out that themes are a focus of meaning pointing toward an aspect of the essence of a phenomenon—he described them as like knots in the webs of experience, as threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated. While no single statement can capture the mystery, the essence of a deeply meaningful experience, it is the job of the researcher to uncover thematic aspects of the phenomenon from the texts and to write rich, deep textural descriptions of each emerging theme that somehow capture its meaning. The interpretive power of thematic reflection is revealed when the essence of a theme is captured in a rich, deep phenomenological description. This cyclical hermeneutic process of analysis, which involved moving between the parts and the whole, constantly clarified emerging interpretations and enabled me to identify emerging themes and to write up phenomenologically sensitive textural descriptions around the themes. Van Manen (2014) notes that "phenomenology differs from almost every other social and human science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, largely without taxonomising, classifying, codifying, or abstracting it." For that reason, I refer to the outcomes of this research as insights rather than findings.

The interviews involved the use of open-ended, holistic, semi-structured questions/prompts in a form suited to the ages of the children involved—for example, analogical questions such as '*If meditation was a colour what colour would it be?*' In addition, I used two innovative methods which were designed to enable the children to generate their own narratives (Nixon 2013). The first was photo-elicitation. I developed a portfolio of thirty images depicting a range of ordinary life situations and some imaginative scenes, unrelated to the research topic. I was careful not to use images that might be commonly regarded as symbols of spirituality or religion as this might lead the children in a particular direction. During their first interview each child was invited to choose three or four that most reminded them of meditation. In effect, they were being asked to choose which images, in their experience, were the best metaphors for their experience of meditation. The children were then asked to describe what they saw in each of their chosen images and to say why they reminded them of meditation. This methodology enabled each child and the interviewer to be mutually engaged in uncovering the child's signification of meaning.

Let me give two simple examples of how this worked, beginning with Kate who was 11 years old. She chose the image of a blue bird sitting still on a branch as one that reminded her of meditation. As was the practice in the interviews, Kate was first asked to describe what she saw before exploring why it reminded her of meditation.

> K: *I see a tree, a living tree, like a living person. And, the bird is like my brain when I meditate—she is peaceful and still; nothing is bothering it and everything is calm.*

I: That's interesting, that you describe the tree as a living thing, like a living person. You can see the buds coming out.
K: *Yes, these would be . . . like . . . it's spirit . . . blossoming.*
I: OK so the spirit of the tree is blossoming forth, it's just about to burst forth. Is there a sense from what you're saying, and I want to be careful not to put words into your mouth, but is there some sense in what you're saying that, for you, in meditation there is something about the spirit . . . blossoming?
K: *Yeah. It's like the spirit is showing its 'bright.' Everybody has their own unique, talent or 'shine.' Mine would be music.*
I: So there is a spirit or an energy in every person?
K: *Yes. My best friend's 'shine' is that she is really friendly.*
I: So are you saying that meditation somehow enriches that or releases that or encourages it?
K: *Yes. It's like it says to you 'OK, now it's your time to grow.'*
I: And this silent growth happens because you take the time for meditation?
K: *Yes.*
I: And this blossoming within you makes you stronger somehow?
K: *Yeah. Your heart or your soul grows stronger and is a lot less easy to break.*

Kate statement that meditation "lets you know: OK. Now it's your time to grow" points metaphorically to her understanding of who she truly was—to her innate understanding of her true nature, her true-self. The second example involves Jason, who was 12 years old. Like several others, he choose a bright and colourful image of tropical fish swimming underwater on a coral reef.

J: *I picked that one because it's like all the fish are free to swim around and they have space to do what they want to do; and it's very colourful and everything under the ocean is beautiful.*

He choose that image because it was bright and colourful and because it made the fish seem so happy and he clarified that meditation made him feel happy and joyful. In the discussion that followed he suggested that the fish had the freedom to be as they wanted all day "because that was what they were made to do." He suggested that meditation gave him the space to be himself. It became clear that the nature of that freedom was, in essence, the freedom to choose to be a best person, he could be, the freedom to live up to his ideals, to be true to his ever-deepening understanding of his true nature.

Bernard McGinn notes how, down through the centuries, the mystics speak of God through images that suggest rather than exhaust their ultimate meaning—for example, images such as God as an infinite ocean (McGinn and McGinn 2003). The examples above indicate how the children too gave metaphorical expression to mystical understanding through images. Photo-elicitation proved to be a very child-centred approach which enabled the children through concrete, familiar scenes, to give metaphorical expression to aspects of their experience of the spiritual in meditation that would otherwise have been impossible to put into words.

In order to give children an opportunity to reflect on what other children had said, I also developed an original approach which I have named the *Selection Box. It comprised a set of about 30 comment cards*, each containing a *brief phenomenological description* derived from the full set of first-round interviews; for example 'Meditation helps me to get on better with others,' 'Meditation helps me to open my heart,' and so on. In the second-round of interviews each child was given the full set and asked to consider which, if any, resonated with their own experience and then to describe what the expression meant to them in light of their own experience of meditation. This very tactile method *enabled children to reflect on the comments of other children* without being unduly influenced by them. See (Removed for peer-review) for a more detailed account of the Selection Box method that paper also describes in some detail how the children experienced the practice of meditation and the practical benefits they perceived they gained from the practice, as well as unfolding their experience of its fruits. In the remainder of this paper I set out how the children describe the *fruits* of meditation, as much as possible in their own words. It is worth noting that the 70 children interviewed were by-in-large very enthusiastic in their responses with just two children expressing any ambivalence about the fruits of the practice in their experience.

4. How Children Describe the Fruits of Meditation

The wisdom traditions of the world believe that the regular practice of meditation can produce deep inner fruits that contribute to the well-being of individuals and society, to human flourishing (De Wit 1991). Meditation helps us to appreciate the validity and value of perceptual knowledge; it alerts us to the fact that our thinking colours and distorts how we interpret reality and hence it improves our clarity of perception (De Wit 1999). It broadens and deepens human consciousness, teaching us that our perception of reality is relative to our current stage of consciousness and, as a consequence, our sense of self-identity is transformed (Wilber 2006; Bourgeault 2016). The religious traditions of the world speak of such inner human flourishing in terms of the spirit and maintain that meditation has the capacity to nourish the innate spirituality of the individual.

Regarding the fruits of meditation *for children*, Christie (2008) suggests that the practice leads to increased self-knowledge and self-acceptance and deepens their personal relationship with God. A core question for my research was whether meditation had the capacity to produce such fruits in children and, if so, how did they experience those fruits in their lives? From my analysis of my conversations with the children I have discerned four core themes, which I describe in their own words, as follows: *Meditation helps you to be yourself, it helps you to feel the goodness inside, it brings you closer to God* and *it makes you a kinder person.*

4.1. Meditation Helps You to Be Yourself

The children observed how meditation helped them to become more present to themselves in their lived experience; they were better able to live in the moment and to be true to themselves, to be themselves. Pamela (11 years old) was one of the children who chose the image of a bird on a branch as one that reminded her of meditation; she commented "I see a bird looking into the sky and thinking 'Why don't I go out there and show them who I really am.' She clarified that meditation made her realise: "I can be myself and I accept myself for who I am. I realise it's just really nice to be myself." Jack (11) observed that "Sometimes when I'm angry or upset, I don't feel like I'm the real me. But then I meditate and I find that I am the real me." In other words, he discovered in the silence of meditation, a sense of who he truly was beneath the noise of daily life. Norah (10) said meditation made her realise "When I meditate I feel more 'me' than I ever did before." Seven year-old Helena expressed this sense of finding herself very poignantly when she said "When meditation is deep in you, you feel like you are somewhere you've always wanted to be since you were small"—this from a seven-year old!

These conversations gave voice to the children's sense of their deepest nature, their true-self; but meditation also made them aware of their feelings, of their deep desire to fit-in with their peers Frances (11) said that meditation helped her to understand that "When I'm not being myself, when I'm talking to people I might say what I think they want to hear, things that I wouldn't normally say. If I say what I would think myself, they might not be happy with me and they might not want to talk to me." But the practice helped the children to resist that pressure and remain true to themselves; meditation somehow gave them the courage to be themselves. They discovered how their desires and preoccupations could imprison them but that meditation helped to free them to act as they really wanted to rather than give in to the expectations of others. Many children expressed the view that meditation gives them a better perspective on things. What seemed like a big problem before meditation doesn't bother them at all after meditation.

It is clear from these accounts that meditation develops in children a deepening sense of self-presence, of attentive awareness to their own lived experience—not just in the course of meditating, but a greater sense of being present to themselves and their circumstances at all times.

4.2. Meditation Helps You Feel the Goodness Inside

Very many children spoke of becoming intensely aware in meditation of their own inherent goodness and a strong sense that they are unconditionally loved. For example, Jack (11) felt that

"When I'm angry I don't feel the goodness inside, but when I meditate, then I do feel the goodness in me." And Sophie (8) noted that "Meditation helps me to be more aware of the goodness inside me. Lucy (10) described how "When you're not doing meditation, you sort of . . . have a snap inside you. As if you are always getting ready to snap. But when you do meditation, the goodness comes out. The bad feelings disappear and the goodness flows in." Derek (9) felt that meditation "releases kindness in you ... and makes you feel more open-minded."

Barry (10) expressed the same idea a little differently, saying that sometimes people act badly, forgetting they are really good on the inside and "Meditation helps me to understand that if someone is behaving badly, that there is still goodness inside of them. And I think if they meditated they might realise that for themselves." In other words, as well as making them aware of the goodness within themselves, meditation also helped them to become more keenly aware of the innate goodness in others. Jessica (9) suggested a parity of goodness inside herself and others when she said that "It doesn't make me think 'Well, that person is better than me' and it doesn't make me feel like I'm better than anybody else. It makes me feel that I fit in with everybody else."

Jason (12) said that the energy he gets from meditation "comes from the heart . . . as if your heart is telling you a good thing . . . I think it's more or less like exploring what you really are; like trying to find out who you really are. Not the person you pretend to be but exploring the person that you actually are . . . Sometimes I feel like I just want to be the person I am, but if I be that person people might bully me about it." It seems that many of the children cherish the opportunity to simply be themselves in the silence of meditation; they recognise that the goodness deep inside is their true-self, even if they don't use those words exactly to describe it. The practice of meditation seems to create an opportunity for self-recognition at a very deep level which makes children keenly aware of the tension that arises within when they are not true to 'themselves,' not true to their sense of their 'true-self.' Derek (9) commented that if someone says something nasty to him it can make him feel bad inside "but when I do meditation I feel different. Something inhabits inside of me that makes me feel I am still a good person. When I meditate it helps me feel that whatever anyone says, I know 'This is who I am.'"

Many of the children spoke of meditation as a heart-centred activity. It was evident from the language they used and from their body-language that, for the children to, this discovery of their essential nature was heart-centred. Aimee said that meditation felt really good and, placing a hand on her heart, indicated that she felt warmth around her heart when she meditates. Like Julia a moment ago, Lucy (10) said that meditation brought her deeper inside herself. She said that normally "you don't pay attention to your heart. But when you're in meditation, you don't use your brain; instead, you are realising what's inside you . . . what are you inside; and you are your heart." In this comment Lucy captures, in her own way, the subtle distinction between conceptual and perceptual knowledge. She is suggesting here that in meditation, she does not engage in conceptual thinking but she is aware that (perceptual) knowledge somehow arises in her consciousness nonetheless—her feelings surface and make themselves more intimately known in a way that might be described as primordial or perceptual—Van Manen (2014) describes such awareness as knowledge that presents itself to the conscious mind which is not the result of thoughtful reflection. Although she does not explain it precisely in those terms, it is clear that Lucy recognises the innate goodness within as a vital and vibrant element of her true self. Many of the children referred to their growing awareness of the goodness within them as a fruit of meditation. For example, Doireann (11) pointed toward this process of perceptual discovery in her own unique way:

> When you meditate you discover things you didn't know. It's like a really old house. You might have lived in the house for years and then one day you just find a little cubbyhole that you never noticed before. And what you find is really interesting. It's like that about yourself. It's like a secret garden that you don't find, even though you walk by it every day. And then, suddenly, you discover it. It's just a hidden part of you that no one knows about, not even yourself. But one day you just come across it and you keep it to yourself. You

> don't really tell anyone about it . . . It fills everything with love and hope. But it's hard to explain.

Not alone did meditation draw the children's awareness to the innate goodness inside themselves but it also made them keenly aware of the innate goodness in others. This discovery points to a growing awareness of the true-self within themselves and in others.

4.3. Meditation Brings You Closer to God

The children felt that meditation brought them closer to God. They experienced this as they meditated but they also experienced this closeness as a connection that deepened over time as they continued to practice meditation. In other words, their spirituality was enkindled and nourished by the practice as they continued to meditate regularly. Natalie (11) expressed the connection with the Divine very succinctly:

> Meditation helps me to connect with God because normally we are so busy and we don't pay attention to God. But when we meditate, we get about five or ten minutes to connect with God and to feel closer. I take a few minutes, not to talk to him, but to be with him, to feel closer to him.

Ella (9) noted that: "When I meditate it feels like me and God are connected. It feels like he's giving me loads of love when I'm meditating. I can feel his love." She went on to say that sometimes in her sleep she dreams she is meditating and God is meditating right beside her.

Norah (10) described that she felt really close to God in meditation because "I get my Communion candle and I light it and I feel like he's there in the flame." Aideen (11) felt that "we are all a little bit of God." She went on to explain "I think we can all be like God if we try . . . so that we all have a little bit of God in us." Nessa (11) said that somehow meditation made her feel that she 'knows' God. Derek (9), described his strong sense of being nourished and energised by meditation: "When I meditate I feel . . . a certain stretching of me . . . It feels like a light is shining on me. All over me, like the light of God through a window . . . and, I feel like God is telling me something."

Many children were pleased that the whole school meditated together. For example, Adrian (11) felt his sense of being connected to God in meditation was strengthened by the fact that they all meditated together saying "It feels like everyone is one . . . It feels like no one is around you, as if everyone is where you are now. And God is in the presence."

Nessa (11) was one of many children who linked their meditation with a sense of being very close to relatives who had passed from this life. She explained that when she meditates she goes "on a journey down to God. And then God just appears; he doesn't talk. It's just like a sense that he is there. And I can see my granddad (who passed away) in the background." Although these children are young, they are not entirely naive. As well as stating that they experienced a sense of God's presence in meditation, some also indicated how they struggled to come to terms with what that actually meant.

These accounts suggest that meditation helps children to begin to trust in that perceptual knowledge, to appropriate its deepest meanings at a non-conceptual level, deepening their own sense of being connected to God. Although meditation validated their perceptual knowledge of the presence of God in meditation, they struggled to make sense of it conceptually. This suggests it is important to speak with children about their experience of perceptual knowledge and how it can manifest itself in their lives in the context of their spiritual development and in their appreciation of poetry, drama and art.

4.4. Meditation Makes You a Kinder Person

Many of the children also spoke of how they experienced meditation as a form of guidance. The children did not merely experience spiritual nourishment as a fruit of meditation but it also impacted on their daily living. Many children felt that the practice guided them gently to do the

right thing, to act more responsibly. For example, Sophie (8) suggested that meditation made her a kinder person, which seemed to be a response to her growing awareness of her true essence: "When I let go of the things that are bothering me, it's like I've become a kinder person. If I've done unkind things to others, it makes me realise that's not who I am. It makes me kinder and I go and say 'Sorry.'" Lena (11) observed that "When your mind is full of worries and troubles, it's like you are locked in a cage and you can't get out but then when you meditate, you begin to feel free. The bars of the cage just disappear and you just know what to do. You are able to picture your own path and you follow it."

Jason (12) described his sense that meditation was "pushing me in the direction of my inner person, towards what I should be. Meditation feeds you in a spiritual way. Because it helps you to think about the person you should be." Grace (9) considered that she wouldn't be as honest a person if it weren't for meditation: "Meditation helps you be honest with yourself and be honest with your friends and everyone around you, because if you're not honest with yourself you can't be honest with anyone else." She went on to say that meditation "helps you to be the best that you can be . . . when I'm talking to God I can be honest, the most honest I want to be. I don't have to pretend or hide anything from anyone when I'm in meditation." Aideen (11) described her sense of being guided by meditation in terms of what she called her 'inner eye,' a concept she had learned from Wordworth's poem 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,' which helped her to comprehend her growing sense of inner awakening. She described a time when she felt called to intervene—and did so—to protect a classmate who was being bullied and she did so, even though she feared the bullies might turn on her if she got involved, but she allowed herself to be guided by her inner eye.

The subtle language of the children reveals how meditation seems to lead the children to a kind of insightful knowledge, which inspires them to respond rather than react to situations they encounter; as if somehow, deep within the psyche, they have come to understand what response the particular situation calls for and they act on that wisdom rather than react based on their own egoic concerns. Although it may seem paradoxical, it seems that the practice of self-forgetfulness leads to a growing sense of self-responsibility and the capacity to act on it.

5. Conclusions

The wisdom traditions of the world have long held that the regular practice of meditation can contribute to the well-being of individuals and society, to human flourishing. The literature suggests that meditation helps practitioners to appreciate the validity and value of perceptual knowledge, makes them keenly aware that their thinking colours and distorts how they interpret reality and broadens and deepens human consciousness, transforming one's sense of self-identity. The religious traditions of the world speak of such inner human flourishing in spiritual terms. My research into the child's experience of meditation confirms that children too benefit from the fruits of the practice; that in addition to the psychological, emotional and cognitive benefits that arise for them, they find that they are touched at a very deep inner level of consciousness. Meditation deepens their self-awareness, it awakens the heart of the child to the true-self within, it nourishes their spirituality and inspires them towards authentic, compassionate living.

While Fowler's model of faith development (Fowler 1981) downplayed the importance of personal spiritual experience as an aspect of children's spirituality, this study highlights the vital importance of ensuring that children have access to opportunities to engage their own spirituality and to recognise and value it. Hyde (2010) warns of the danger that religious education may lose sight of children's "deep and profound spirituality—and instead becomes concerned only with the transmission of its own sets of belief and values." Ota (2001) argues that for religious education to contribute in a meaningful way to children's spiritual growth may require it to "engage with pupils, allowing them to share their stories and to contribute to the community's story." This suggests that meditation has very rich potential for enabling children to access deep inner experience of that which transcends them and which can help them to live life abundantly. While it is undoubtedly true that children may encounter Jesus through bible stories presented in language that is age-appropriate, nonetheless the practice of

meditation offers a different form of encounter through the language of silence. Bible and Gospel stories and the practice of meditation are complimentary disciplines, each supporting the experience of personal encounter with the Divine in very different ways. I suggest that neither form should be neglected but that there is a need to find space within the curriculum, ideally on a daily basis, for children to experience the deep connection between the true-self and the Divine through the practice of meditation.

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