

Consider the Lilies: The Practice of Christian Meditation

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Upper St. Claire, PA
September 20, 2020

“Primary Wonder,” Denise Levertov

Days pass when I forget the mystery.
Problems insoluble and problems offering
their own ignored solutions
jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
their colored clothes; cap and bells.

And then

once more the quiet mystery
is present to me, the throng's clamor
recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void: and that, O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed One, You still,
hour by hour sustain it.

Some Moments along the Way (continued)

John Cassian—360-435, *Conferences*, Conference 10

You were quite right to make the comparison between training in continuous prayer and the teaching of children who at first do not know the alphabet, do not recognize letters, and are unable to write with a sure and firm hand. Models are put before them, carefully drawn in wax. By continually studying them, by practicing every day to reproduce them, they learn at last to write.

The same happens with contemplation. You need a model and you keep it constantly before your eyes. You learn either to turn it in a salutary way over and over in your spirit or else, as you use it and meditate upon it, you lift yourself upward to the most sublime sights.

And what follows now is the model to teach you, the prayer formula for which you are searching. Every monk who wants to think continuously about God should get accustomed to meditating endlessly on it and to banishing all

other thoughts for its sake. But he will not hold onto it unless he breaks free from all bodily concerns and cares.

This is something which has been handed on to us by some of the oldest of the Fathers and it is something which we hand on to only a very small number of souls eager to know it:

To keep the thought of God always in your mind you must cling totally to this formula for piety: 'Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue' (Ps 69:2).

Eastern Orthodoxy

Prayer of the Heart

Hesychia

Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner"

[The prayer of the heart is] something not merely said by the lips, not merely thought by the mind, but offered spontaneously by the whole of one's being—lips, intellect, emotions, will, and body. The prayer fills the entire consciousness, and no longer has to be forced out, but says itself. Such prayer of the heart cannot be attained simply through our own efforts, but is a gift conferred by the grace of God. (Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*)

Teresa of Avila—1515-1582

A Theology for Christian Meditation/Contemplative Practice

Augustine of Hippo—354-430, *Confessions*

Mart Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*

Union with God is not something we acquire by a technique but the grounding truth of our lives that engenders the very search for God. Because God is the ground of our being, the relationship between creature and Creator is such that, by sheer grace, separation is not possible. God does not know how to be absent. The fact that most of us experience throughout most of our lives a sense of absence or distance from God is the great illusion that we are caught up in; it is the human condition. The

sense of separation from God is real, but the meeting of stillness reveals that this perceived separation does not have the last word. This illusion of separation is generated by the mind and is sustained by the riveting of our attention to the interior soap opera, the constant chatter of the cocktail party going on in our heads. For most of us this is what normal is, and we are good at coming up with ways of coping with this perceived separation (our consumer driven-entertainment culture takes care of much of it). ...

The grace of salvation, the grace of Christian wholeness, that flowers in silence, dispels this illusion of separation. For when the mind is brought to stillness, and all our strategies of acquisition have dropped, a deeper truth present itself; we are and have always been one with God and we are all on in God. (Laird, 15-16).

Two Varieties of Contemplative Practice

Concentrated Awareness

Open Awareness

Thomas Merton

Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say that it is centered on faith by which alone we can know the presence of God. One might say this give my meditation the character described by the Prophet as "being before God as if you saw him." Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realizing Him as all ... There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all this is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence. If I am still present "myself" this I recognize not as an obstacle ... If He will He can make the Nothingness into a total clarity. If He does not will, then the Nothingness actually seems to itself to be an object and remains an obstacle. Such is my ordinary way of prayer or meditation. It is not "thinking about" anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the invisible. Which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible. (Private letter)

Exploring Open Awareness

Myth: To meditate, you have to clear your mind and quiet your thoughts.

Reality: Meditation has nothing to do with getting rid of thoughts; it's about noticing and not holding onto them; it's about learning to not mistake your thoughts for reality and cling to them.

Guidelines for Practicing Open Awareness

From James Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God*

“The guidelines for meditation practice that I suggest are, with respect to the body, to sit still, to sit straight, to close your eyes or lower them toward the ground, to breathe slowly and naturally, and to place your hands in a natural or meaningful position in your lap. With respect to the mind, the guideline is to be present, open, and awake, neither clinging to nor rejecting anything. And with respect to attitude, the guideline is to maintain nonjudgmental compassion toward yourself as you experience yourself clinging to and rejecting everything, and nonjudgmental compassion toward others in their powerlessness, on with yours” (24).

What do I do with thoughts?

Three images:

- Debris on a river: watch them float by
- Cars on a road: watch them ride by
- Sitting behind a waterfall: watch them cascade down
 - COMMONALITY: Distance between the *observer* and the *thought*—no longer identifying with the thoughts.

When you find yourself lost in thought: You let go of the thought and bring yourself back to the posture of the observer—to open awareness. I can do this by:

- Simply letting go and coming back to open awareness;
- Repeating once a prayer word (Jesus, Abba, Shalom, etc.), that helps you let go of the thought and reminds you of your intention to be open and present to God;
- Bring your attention back to your breath to help you let go of the thought, then resume a mental posture of the observer—open awareness.