

The Art of Relaxing as an Adjunct to Religious Concentration¹

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Talk given by request of Father Conrad Pepler at the conference for "Formation Teams" which took the place of the annual conference for Juniorate and Novice Mistresses at Spode House, Staffs., in February 1972; it also included religious men. It was hoped the conference would be of use in developing the future form of religious life which, after a period of considerable change and some uncertainty, is beginning to show valid signs of renewal and growth.

The talk was planned only as an introduction to the subject and not as a detailed exposition of a technique.

The motivation of anyone wishing to learn to relax can be widely varied but, to me, the main value of subjecting oneself to this discipline is that one learns to be receptive and one learns to concentrate. From these two spheres of ability come many by-products, but there is insufficient time to discuss these now.

In teaching relaxation we are very much concerned with both the problems pertaining to the individual and those of the individual living in community. These two aspects are dealt with separately. In the first place, where each person withdraws from contact with others, closes his eyes and becomes as far as he can "still" in order to find "the Kingdom of God which is within", and the second, where one learns, through what might be called "an active passivity", to develop a much higher degree of objective

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perception of everything which is external to oneself; this perception in inter-personal relations is largely based on an intuitive awareness of tension.

I am not here undervaluing tension. One's whole life, the dynamic of breathing even, is in the balance first of the tension which is contained in activity and then of relaxation. The tension which is damaging is that which is caused by doubt and fear. If there is a bull charging at you from across a field, it is perfectly natural to react with a high degree of tension, adrenalin is released into the bloodstream and one runs as fast as possible. But in society as it is today people too often are in a continual state of residual tension of which they are unaware, which is communicated to others and which is caused by a nagging anxiety that there might suddenly appear a bull (or its equivalent) from which they must escape.

This is in fact a lack of faith. No one can protect himself in such a way as to avoid the possible apparent disasters which the future may hold. Nor can one understand or predict the will of God. One has to go out into the darkness.

A baby when it is born is totally receptive, it takes everything in and has no protective mechanism by which it can reject experience. It has to learn that cause and effect follow one another. Its relationship with others is guided by intuition and that intuition is, in my belief, based on an awareness of tension.

As the child grows it develops a capacity for rational thought which, while it is a necessary and very important power, is also an inhibiting one. It learns to rely more on rational thinking than on the evidence of its senses. That sensory perception with which it was born becomes increasingly dulled and the conclusions which are to be reached from the evidence of sensory perception are relegated to the unconscious mind.

An example of this in adult behaviour is where A is dissatisfied with B but does not express this dissatisfaction in words. In any family or community of people this must happen many times. B may become aware of A's feeling by assessment of what have been called "dynamic cues"—tones of voice, gesture, facial expression—these are all ways in which emotional tension is transmitted. A baby would sense and react

immediately to any emotional atmosphere which surrounds it—it is in fact most responsive to touch; an adult can and often does react to these dynamic cues, but also is apt to receive and react to them subconsciously while, with his thinking brain, he works out a feasible rationalisation for his reaction. In the case of the example given, B may well say that he finds A objectionable because—and he makes use of one of the endless variety of reasons for which we criticise each other; *but* the original cause of B's dissatisfaction with A was A's dissatisfaction with B which has not been expressed or consciously thrashed out, but which, nevertheless has been transmitted.

In learning relaxation one learns to improve one's conscious awareness of intuitive perception. Ideally B after sensing the disapproval of A, and admitting it to his consciousness, would go up to A and say "what have I done? How have I offended you?" and, with the grace of God, all would be well.

The child as it grows learns rationally to interpret both the dynamic and static cues which are presented to it and becomes aware of itself as distinct from others. The child sees not only how other people affect it but also how it affects them. It develops, of necessity, a protective screen which it first adopts when dealing with those who are not in close relationships to itself. This has to be. It has to learn to use the rules of behaviour, or manners, which are suitable to the culture in which it lives in order to maintain relationships which cannot, for a variety of reasons, be on a deep level. Should the child meet an acquaintance by chance, it says "How do you do" and keeps on walking; and nothing has changed in the relationship. If it had said nothing then that relationship might deteriorate. If it had flung its arms around the person the relationship might, or might not improve. But our child has done neither of these things so the relationship is maintained at that same level.

But unfortunately the protective screen which it learns to erect around itself too often becomes impenetrable and the next stage is reached where the child believes that the image which it wishes to present to others is the real one. Therefore its main concern on meeting other people is whether or not they accept and react to the image of itself which it wishes to project. It has little real communication with others because it is looking in

them, like Narcissus, for a reflection of its own self.

In order to achieve any degree of objectivity perception of others or of the World around us, or indeed of God, one must be receptive. And this is where relaxation comes in again.

How often do we form an image of the God we need, and hang on to that image the attributes which we consider He should have. Eckhart says "No man can tell of God exactly what He is". According to St. Dionysius God is not anything we can describe or think. St. Augustine cries, "I who have ever been in God and ever more shall be, would sooner I never had been and never more shall be than that we found a single word that we would say of God. Were we compelled to speak of God, in that case I would say 'Verily in no sense is God comprehensible nor yet obtainable'. God is what thought cannot better. Nay, I declare God beggars human thought; He transcends all human conception. No man knows what God is. Ought that a man could or would think of God, God is not at all".

It is only by becoming receptive that we learn anything new. If we have a pre-conceived idea about what we are going to learn, then we minimise the chance of being able to perceive something new, something outside our previous experience. As God cannot be contained within terms which can be described or analysed by a process of reasoning then our awareness of Him has to be direct. We must become as little children. Knowledge of God is in intellectual receptivity, not in effort because effort presupposes a pre-determined objective and one can have no preconceived ideas about God. "Be still and know that I am God". When one is still, when one is receptive one doesn't "believe in God", one *knows God*.

Through receptivity comes the ability to concentrate. In this interpretation of the word, "concentration" means complete absorption and this is rarely achieved for long. What concentration *is not* is an external active discipline where the attention of one part of the mind is forced into something. It is, again, an apparently passive function. The attention is absorbed if it is allowed to be. Too often the brain is like a top which spins around a certain orbit quite haphazardly. Thoughts come and go at random.

Concentration has to be an immediate absorption. It has to do with the present moment. At *this* moment one is absorbed by speculation about possibly the future or about experience of the present, or recollection of the past, but *in this moment* all the attention of both mind and body—and the two cannot be divorced—is concentrated in one direction. This is not something to be achieved by effort but rather by a reduction of effort. Effort is a hindrance to concentration.

Again I quote from Eckhardt when he talks of three kinds of knowledge: "The first is bodily, the eye for instance, is sensible of images. The second is mental but still uses images of bodily things. The third is in the interior mind which knows without image or likeness and this knowledge is like unto the angels".

And so, in meditation, one thinks first of how to dispose one's body. As it is impossible to separate the mind from the body so it is impossible to be emotionally calm and physically tense. But the positive side of this, which is often ignored, is that it is equally impossible when physically relaxed to be emotionally disturbed. Relaxation is a means, not of imposing control or of disciplining the various signs of emotion, but it is a means of actually changing that emotion. An example of this which is easily demonstrable is if you clench your fists as tightly as possible for the space of a few minutes. Keep your eyes closed to facilitate the awareness of your body and notice whether your teeth begin to clench also, whether your breathing quickens and whether you begin to feel aggressive.

Or else notice whether it is possible to continue to feel aggressive if your hands are totally relaxed.

Notice the difference in the quality of the movement, and in the emotion engendered, if you raise your arms with the palms facing upwards or if you raise them with the palms facing down.

The traditional movements of the priest's hands during the Mass indicate that the worship of God is not only with the brain, but also with the body.

It is not unfortunately possible to teach this discipline by writing about it. I have

tried only to explain why it is of value, and how, once one has made the acquaintance as it were, of this central core of quiescence it can be maintained in any activity or when facing any circumstances.