

# On Meditation

by  
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HOW is one to approach, before an audience such as this, the subject of Meditation? One might devote the limited time at our disposal to recalling what some of the saints and masters of the spiritual life have said on the topic;—but that could be to turn out a very sketchy anthology of familiar texts. Or one might attempt a brief theological analysis, with a view to elucidating some of the principles that underlie religious meditation;—but this could prove to be too abstract and rather boring. Or, again, one might launch into an exhortation on the importance of the practice;—but this would surely be somewhat oppressive to listen to, besides being in other respects out of place.

Instead, I propose to speak about meditation in the experience of one particular individual, as this is the area I feel least incompetent about. If I refer to him in the third person, that is not intended to deceive anyone—only to provide a thin covering of respectability to a piece of egotistical exhibitionism.

Take, then, a young man who entered a Benedictine monastery at the age of 23. Brought up all his life in the Roman Catholic faith, he had not been consistently pious (rather the reverse), nor had he up to that age, or since, undergone anything that might be described as a spectacular religious experience or personal conversion. However, from the age of 20, while still "in the world" (as we say), he came under Jesuit influence and was much affected by the meditation system of St. Ignatius Loyola. This led to a period of considerable personal austerity: hair shirts, fastings, disciplines and the like: which together produced, or seemed to produce, a highly conscious devotion to the person of our Lord in his sacred humanity. It produced also a desire to be virtuous and to engage in some apostolic work for the spread of God's kingdom.

Looking back on that period from the sophisticated level of later years, our non-hero was grateful for the insights gained, but became persuaded that those insights were not sufficiently profound to sustain the deeper life of the spirit. This for two chief reasons: (i) the Ignatian method, in its subject matter, did not seem to engage the intellect: it remained within the sphere of the pictorial imagination—i.e., imaginative reconstructions of the life of our Lord etc.; (ii) the stress is on the will and effortless striving—without a proportionate mental illumination to elicit or direct that striving.

However, he would still say that most young men—particularly those who find their emotions and passions getting out of hand—could probably profit, at some stage in their spiritual careers, from a judiciously administered dose of Ignatian spirituality.

On entering the monastery he found the atmosphere quite different—with a strong, perhaps unreasonably strong, anti-Ignatian bias. The type of spirituality aimed at being corporate rather than individual, it was centered on the Mass and the Divine Office in choir. But always there was required at least one half hour's mental prayer or meditation each day. Not much definite instruction was given about this. One found oneself toying with a verse from the Psalms or the New Testament, a saying of St. John of the Cross, an aspiration from Father Augustine Baker—or else, more than likely, just falling asleep.

Certain convictions, however, did begin to take shape in his mind in those early years of Benedictine life. One conviction was that being attentive in church was not enough; that was desirable—but more important was the need to be recollected and generally aware outside church: in one's dealings with people and situations around one. Another conviction was the importance of solitude, to have resources within oneself so that one could be happy alone. Also it seemed to him that recollectedness and fruitful solitude in some way were linked with meditation. If one failed to meditate the mind would dissipate itself and one could never experience even the beginnings of what Plotinus (for he had read Plotinus, in a sort of way, at an early stage) calls—"the flight of the alone to the Alone."

Coming to the study of theology, with the Dominicans at Oxford, he made further discoveries. The *Summa Theologica*, besides providing a magnificent doctrinal framework, seemed to convey two incidental lessons bearing upon religious meditation. One lesson was—the inadequacy of verbal statements either to express what is in the mind or to describe what lies outside it. The other lesson concerned the *realism* of credal statements: by this I mean, St. Thomas's position that the act of faith is not simply an assent to a verbal proposition, but a movement of the mind to that to which the proposition relates. Thus, when we say, "Credo in unum Deum" (*in* with the accusative)—the mind, as it were, moves towards God in an act of vital apprehension.

When all this was linked with the Augustinian-Thomist psychology bearing upon God's indwelling within the soul: the immanent presence of the Holy Trinity within the human spirit—our student gained a deeper insight into the rewarding possibilities of meditation. One had only to make purified acts of faith and love to be in direct, though obscure, contact with God. By sanctifying grace, according to Thomas, the soul is equipped with the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Granted sufficient fidelity, then, one could experience something of the Divine. With the presumptuousness of youth, this particular student began to fancy that he knew what St. Thomas meant when he spoke of his own theological *Summa* being so much "straw" compared to what he had seen in vision.

The cautionary lesson here appeared to be that there is a heady intellectualism, even in divinity, which needs to be corrected by an awareness of the creature's nothingness before God—and by the realization that the test of a Christian is not the heights of contemplative prayer as he may suppose himself to have reached, but the degree of his non-self-righteousness, and of his charity and compassion towards those around him.

A book which had an enormous effect on him at that time was the famous 14th century spiritual treatise, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The doctrine in that work, which still lingers in his mind, is the extreme simplicity to which private prayer may be reduced—

perhaps to no more than the mental utterance of the single word: God, or Jesus. The *Cloud* holds out as a goal, which still seems to him realistic if as yet far from being attained, the possibility of being aware of "Ultimate Reality" by way of an almost continuous state. (I quote from Chapter 71 of the *Cloud*):

...there are some who by grace are so sensitive spiritually and so at home with God in this grace of contemplation that they may have it when they like and under normal spiritual working conditions, whether they are sitting, walking, standing, kneeling. And at these times they are in full control of their faculties, both physical and spiritual, and can use them if they wish...

Parallel to his preoccupation with Christian theology and his attempts at mental prayer, our monastic student has been taking an amateur's interest in the spirituality stemming from India, especially Buddhism. (And at this point I propose to drop the perhaps irritating allusive device and switch to the first person singular.) Of the institutional and ritualistic aspects of Buddhism I am not qualified to speak. What seem to me of great interest to Christians are the Buddhist insight and manner of meditation. By the Buddhist insight I mean roughly what is indicated in Gautama's Holy Truths, and by meditation I mean the kind of physical and mental discipline practised by Zen Buddhists.

In the few brief remarks I shall make on this subject, I don't propose at every stage, or indeed at any stage, to establish the obvious parallels (as they appear to me) with Christianity. Suffice it to say that I think those parallels are incontestable, and that my (admittedly very limited) contacts with Buddhism and Buddhists, which have always been sympathetic and often almost reverential, have not had the slightest weakening effect on the traditional spirituality, as I have learnt it, of Catholicism.

Buddhism accepts as the basic fact of life the omnipresence of suffering, in the sense of frustration. We live in a vale of tears. Things never go right for long. We are faced with death—eventually our own, but continuously other peoples—with sickness, ill-health, poverty, or just those every-day hour-by-hour setbacks and annoyances of being in uncongenial company, having unsuitable work, living with disagreeable people—or, at the subjective level, living with our own depressions, guilt feelings and general sense of inadequacy.

Now nothing that we do can make these experiences other than they are, but what tends to make them intolerable is what Guatama denotes as "craving"—"craving accompanied by delight and greed, seeking its delight now here, now there; i.e., craving for sensuous experience, craving to perpetuate oneself, craving for extinction." The source of this trouble, be it noted, the very heart of human distress, is not the thing craved for—sensuous experience, for example—but the craving itself. A person may and should enjoy himself in the appropriate context; where he goes wrong is when he is possessed by an obsessive longing for such enjoyment.

The way to deal with this problem, according to Buddhism, is to get rid of (or be relieved from) the craving—"the withdrawal from it, the renouncing of it, liberation from it, non-attachment to it." To achieve this state of liberation (which is enlightenment, Buddhahood) is the point and purpose of human existence: it implies an ethical way of

life, and specifically for Buddhism—the holy (or noble) eightfold path, consisting in "right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

But to lead the appropriate kind of life, we need the appropriate thoughts, or more accurately, the appropriate attitude of mind or spirit. The proximate means for bringing this about is by meditation. And from this point I shall speak of meditation, not in a specifically Buddhist sense, but in a way that is equally applicable to Christians—those Christians, at least, who are concerned with the spiritual life at its deepest or maturest level.

When discussing meditation, we commonly think of meditating on or about something. We have a theme for our meditation. This makes sense as giving a focus to our minds. But whatever theme we choose, even the most exalted, we usually find that it turns out to be rather banal, and that it cannot hold our attention. So we become distracted, our mind wanders, we day-dream—which is a form of wishful thinking, of craving therefore—and meditation becomes as frustrating as, perhaps more frustrating than, any of our normal every-day activities.

Here I would suggest that the fine point of meditation is not to think about something, however edifying, but just to *be* something—in this case to be our true selves. Whenever we are doing anything that requires external action—necessary as it is that we should be concerned with external activity almost all day long—we are never quite our true selves. We are actors, doers, assuming some necessary role or other, though it could be a highly virtuous, even an heroic role.

Yet at times we need just to be ourselves—for it is only when a man's actions flow out, so to speak, from his true being that they make acceptable sense. It is commonly admitted, I think, that we are our best selves when we are wide awake and aware. Not self-consciously aware, in an egoistic self-preoccupied sense, but in so far as our consciousness is actualized—"existentially" (to use a current phrase)—so that in some quite indefinable way our being and our knowledge merge. Momentarily freed from distractions—we just *are*.

To achieve this condition implies, not that we should think about something, but rather that we should think about *nothing* (no-thing). However, our minds being what they are, this seems almost impossible. As soon as we strive to think about *nothing*, that too becomes a thing (perhaps an image of a circle, or an empty hole), and we are as badly off as ever. What we can do, though, if we are sufficiently alert, is not to cling to any thought—to let all thoughts flow by, detach ourselves from them, so allowing them to fade away into nothingness from lack of attention.

Someone may be tempted to ask—what has all this to do with religion? The answer is, a great deal. Paul Tillich has pointed out (truly, I think) that "Religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all of its functions". Again, it has been well said that the only secular thing on earth is the secular heart of man. When we are not reminiscing vainly about the past, or gazing hopefully into the future, but facing present reality—of which, as T. S. Eliot observed, we cannot bear too much—our attitude cannot but be in some way religious: because our mind is then in touch, however obscurely, with the Source of our being. Be it remembered that we

cannot, strictly speaking, think about God; we can only think about an idea of God in our minds, or a picture of God in our imagination—and neither the idea nor the image is God, or even a remotely adequate representation of God. "What God actually is always remains hidden from us," writes St. Thomas Aquinas (in his *De Veritate*). "And this is the highest knowledge we can have of God in this life, that we know him to be above every thought we are able to think of him."

Aquinas uses the spatial metaphor of God being "above" our thought. It is, of course, the sense of God's "aboveness" or "otherness" which colours a great deal of Christian spirituality. God is transcendent. But no less Christian is the sense of God's nearness, His immanence, God's indwelling within man's spirit. Listen to St. Augustine commenting on St. John: (*In Joan Evangel.*, xxiii, 10): "Recognize in thyself something within, within thyself. Leave thou abroad both thy clothing and thy flesh; descend into thyself: go to thy secret chamber, thy mind. If thou be far from thine own self, how canst thou draw near to God? For not in the body but in the mind was man made in the image of God. In his own similitude let us seek God: in his own image recognize the Creator." Something of what Augustine says here, I believe, may be realized in the quiet of meditation. And this leads naturally for me to say a word about bodily posture during meditation. The kneeling position, so natural to Christians, is, one might say, the physical response to God's transcendence. We kneel in suppliance before our Creator. Yet the Divine indwelling has also its appropriate response;—and this seems to be the sitting posture associated with the forms of meditation deriving from India.

Anyone, not least a believing Catholic Christian, who has learned to sit, with body upright, the eyes downcast though not closed, the limbs folded into the center, the breathing so slow and regular as to be hardly perceptible, will testify to a remarkable heightening of consciousness. Mentally, one seems in an indescribable way to be in touch with the Ultimate—and for anyone brought up in the Christian tradition, such periods of meditation, even though practiced with Buddhists (as has been my privilege from time to time)—the Ultimate, in so far as it tends to be mentally formulated, is always in terms of the God manifested in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps, before concluding, I should say a word on the subject of Yoga. Yoga, as we know, means union, and in itself has little to do with bodily posture. Nevertheless, there are certain simple exercises of hatha yoga which many people, including myself, have found of great benefit. We are coming more and more to realize the closeness of the union between body and spirit. It is therefore to be expected that more attention should be given to the kind of physical discipline which has proved itself, through many centuries, to harmonize with, possibly even to promote, deep spirituality.

As I am addressing members of a religious Community, perhaps a word should be said about the practical side of all this—the more so as I have some responsibility for a religious Community myself. First, I would say that this is a field where respect for individual liberty of spirit is paramount. No one should be obliged to meditational practices with which they are out of sympathy or to which they feel no particular calling. Thus I have never spoken about these matters—even to the limited extent that I am doing here—in the weekly conference I give to my own Community. One or two of the younger members have come of their accord to ask me to show them what I do—and of course one is glad to oblige. Similarly, when one gives retreats to other Communities there are

usually a few who feel that they might profit spiritually by such exercises. But the most rewarding experience of all in this respect, incidentally, has been with a small group of Prep school youngsters—who have come along entirely on their own volition—and sat in what has been called Zen Catholic meditation for half an hour of their own time every Sunday evening.

Let me conclude by making the point that in this short address nothing is being advocated. I am not in any sense a man with a message. The matters I have touched on seem to me of great importance; but in the case I know, or think I know best, I'm not sure that these practices have brought much improvement in the one sphere that counts—that comprised by insight, humility, charity and compassion. The most that can be said is that there has been engendered a keen sense of the need for these qualities and an aspiration towards them.

Everything lies, it seems to me, in compassionate insight. We live at a time when "ecumenism" of a sort has become fashionable; but we all know that something more is required than the camaraderie of interdenominational dialogue. To a realistic eye it might appear that, beneath the surface of friendly gestures and manifest good will, there still remain, standing as solidly as ever, the age-old impediments of hereditary and ethnical prejudices, together with corporate ecclesiastical vested interests, effectively blocking any effort to reunite what is left of Christendom. In any case, is the right approach really at the organizational level, the meeting of hierarch with hierarch, the search for mutual understanding with respect to doctrine, the finding of the comprehensive formula? If we can reach the deeper level of an ecumenism of the spirit, we shall not expect differences of Church organization and doctrinal formulations to disappear. We shall find, perhaps, that they do not matter very much.

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Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay in *Studies*:

*Thankfulness means that you should not disobey God by means of the favour which  
He has bestowed on you, nor make of His favour a source of disobedience.*

*Jonaid-e Baghdadi.*