



Map of the Journey

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Fr Laurence suggests ways of looking at progress on the spiritual journey, drawing on patterns described in Scripture and the teachings of the early Desert Fathers. Growth, he says, can only be seen in terms of the goal: "Growing in conformity to the person of Christ." And the journey is not linear. Recognising and accepting the cyclical nature of the patterns, he says, will bring us to humility, detachment and wisdom, as each repetition takes us deeper towards the goal of divinisation. Fr Laurence is a Benedictine monk of the Olivetan Congregation and director of The World Community for Christian Meditation.

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I

Stages of Development

I'd like to look at some ways in which we can give a pattern to or make a map of the spiritual journey, the stages that we pass through in the way of meditation. The spirit, as Jesus said, is like the wind; we don't know where it's coming from, we don't know where it's going. Therefore, if you don't know the beginning or the end of something, you can't measure it. We can't measure the spiritual, of course, in the same way that we can measure the physical, the material – the distance between here and Kuala Lumpur. We can't measure the spiritual in any easy way. We have to use a different kind of imagination; we have to use the scriptures. And one way in which we can sense development or progress is in looking at some of the sets, some of the groups of qualities or experiences, that are described in the scriptures. For example, the gifts of the Spirit, the fruits of the Spirit, and the Beatitudes. These are all ways of describing levels of experience or levels of knowledge even.

Gifts of the Spirit

You remember what the gifts of the Spirit are in 1 Cor 12: 27:

You are Christ's body and each of you a limb or organ of it. Within our community, God has appointed in the first place apostles, in the second place prophets, thirdly teachers, miracle workers, those who have the gift of healing or ability to help others or the power to guide them, or the gift of tongues of various kinds. Are all apostles? All prophets? All teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have the gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues of ecstasy? Can all interpret them? But the higher gifts are those you should prize.

So Paul is talking about some kind of hierarchy in the gifts of the Spirit. Or, we might say, some kind of progress or stages of development in the journey on which our faith matures. So St Paul is speaking about the gifts, and he acknowledges that these are real gifts, that the community can share these gifts. Not everybody has the same gifts.

We know from the same letter that the way people use their gifts can become a problem. People can become proud of their gifts or complicated by their gifts. And they can use their gifts in a way that doesn't harmonise and integrate with the other people in the parish or in the monastery or in the workplace. You can have somebody who is very talented but a real pain in the neck because they only see everything from their point of view and they become proud of their gift. And one gift cannot be allowed to dominate over the others. In this passage, he seems to be addressing some problems in the early Church in Corinth about the use of tongues and the ability to interpret tongues and prophecies which were causing conflict or difficulties in the community. It can happen.

When we first started teaching meditation widely, when the charismatic movement was in full force in many churches in the West, somebody would almost be sure to put up their hand and say, "Well maybe this is OK, I'm not sure really, but where are the gifts of the Spirit in this experience of prayer?" They were perplexed and sometimes a bit angry about being told about a way of prayer in which you didn't assume that you're going to get these gifts, that in the middle of meditation you would start praying in tongues, or that every meditation session would have a healing service as part of it. They were very focused upon these gifts and they were very sincere about how they shared them and used them and so on, but as St Paul says there are higher gifts. The highest gift of all is the gift of love.

Fruits of the Spirit

Then in Galatians Ch 5 he speaks about the fruits of the Spirit. This is after that long description of the characteristics of the lifestyle of

the unspiritual nature: fornication, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, magic, arguments, angry tempers, envy, fits of rage, selfish ambitions, dissensions, party intrigues and jealousies, drinking bouts, orgies and the like. An unspiritual way of living and being, something we need to be healed from. Then by contrast, he describes the harvest of the Spirit. The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. "Against such things, there is no law." Interesting verse: "Against such things there is no law." These represent the freedom of the Spirit, the freedom of the Christian that the Letter to the Galatians is of course affirming:

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the old nature with its passions and desires. If the Spirit is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct its course.

These fruits or harvest of the Spirit are different from the gifts of the Spirit which take a very evident external form, either in the gift of tongues, or the gift of healing or prophecy – usually spoken active communication. But the fruits of the Spirit are at a more interior level. And they represent a transformation of those negative qualities of anger, lust and jealousy and all those negative states of mind which produce dissension and suffering to ourselves and to others. These have been transformed and in their place these fruits have appeared or are appearing which are interior: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control. These can be seen obviously in terms of relationship to other people, how we relate to situations at work, in the parish and with ourselves also. They are about relationship.

But we see in these fruits of the Spirit that they are emerging from some deep place within ourselves: our own true nature. These are the components of the gift of self, the gift of existence that we embody as human beings in Christian faith. And these fruits of the Spirit that we find appearing in our life and in our relationships are not just psychological aspects. When we look at them in the light of

faith, we can see that these are qualities of the divine life appearing in us from our own deep nature. The love, the joy, the peace, the patience, the kindness, the goodness, the fidelity, these are not our own creation. These are not the result of our will power. They are the natural manifestation, the evolution, the growing of essential elements of our own nature, which are the qualities of the divine life, the qualities of the Spirit. Therefore we see them as an example of the process of divinisation. God became human so that human beings might become one with God.

So this is exactly what life is supposed to be about. About growing in conformity, we would say, to the person of Christ, becoming more Christ-like. We don't take pride in this in an egotistical way, because we know perfectly well that we have lots of other faults, problems and hang-ups and that we're not saints. But even though we know that we are not perfect, we know that something good is growing in us, and that it is Christ.

The Beatitudes

The third stage the New Testament offers us to understand the spiritual journey are the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are not so much experiences in the way that the gift of tongues is an experience or the healing gift is an experience. They are not even experiences of a more interior kind like the fruits of the Spirit – becoming more loving, feeling more joyful, finding the joy in yourself rather than through external events, feeling more peaceful even in times of stress or anxiety knowing that the peace is there.

What are the Beatitudes then? I think, the Beatitudes are the transformation of mind, of consciousness. They describe through paradox. The Beatitudes are, each of them, some kind of paradox describing happiness in terms we normally don't associate with happiness, or the ego doesn't think of as what's going to make us happy. Poverty, sorrow, gentleness, hunger for justice, showing mercy is a programme of happiness when we understand happiness in terms of our ultimate goal of contemplation or the vision of God.

And in fact the vision of God is one of the Beatitudes, arising from a pure heart.

I spoke yesterday about the two Beatitudes, poverty of spirit and purity of heart in relation to meditation as it was described by the early Desert monks. If you want to understand what we are doing in saying the mantra, what is the work we are doing (it's important to see it as work), then those Desert monks identified the work of the mantra with poverty of spirit. Remember Cassian says in Conference 10: "When you say your formula, your word, you are renouncing all the riches of thought and imagination. Thereby you come with ready ease," he says, "to the first of the Beatitudes, poverty of spirit." Poverty of spirit coming about through a voluntary renunciation of our own riches. So the beatitudes are more an expression of how we see, how we make meaning, how we enter into the deeper meaning of experience of life with an understanding of what is happening, an understanding of God's presence in every situation in life. It is a wisdom.

The Beatitudes together express a form of wisdom, an integral seeing. When you have a problem you want to go to a wise person for advice. And what you expect to find from that wise person is not so much an answer to your problem perhaps but a new way of seeing how it fits in to your life, how you might make sense of it, how it isn't necessarily a random disaster or a random disruption of your life. They will help you to see it whole and to put it into the picture of your overall experience. This is what the Beatitudes seem to me to do. They give us insights into the deep structures of life, ways in which meaning and the experience of God are found.



2

The Human Being Fully Alive

Jesus uses the image of growth very often in the parables to describe the nature of the Kingdom. St Irenaeus says, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." We have here the idea of fullness, and we have the idea of stages bringing us to that fullness. Our way of glorifying God anyway must be increasing as we come closer to that fullness, as we mature, as we grow up, which is a certain way of looking at human experience, human life.

We are very conscious psychologically today of stages of growth. Modern research has been done into early stages of child development, psychological healing. We are conscious that we have to pass through certain stages of growth, pass through them in a unique way of course according to our personal circumstances and culture. But all human beings pass through stages of growth. Just as we pass through certain physical stages of development, we pass through psychological and perhaps spiritual stages of development as well. So the glory of God is the human being fully alive, which means we glorify God by human development, by becoming fully human, fully open to our own humanity, by becoming more whole, by opening ourselves to the process of healing when there is something in us that needs to be healed. This is not something to be ashamed of. It's something to celebrate, because it is in this way that we are glorifying God.

Perhaps one particular group of people who understand this very well are those in recovery from alcoholism. People from the twelve-step programme have a very clear sense of the stages. They work through the steps, and they work through with a mentor, a spiritual friend. It is a very spiritual programme in fact and many people who have gone through the programme will say they went into it because they were drunks, but they stayed in it because it

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Radical Change

became a spiritual path for them. And I've found it's one of the easiest groups to speak to about meditation, because the eleventh step in the twelve-programme is: "By prayer and meditation to raise our conscious contact with God as we know it." The word God appears in more than half of the twelve-step programme, and of course the two men who founded Alcoholics Anonymous were themselves very devout Christians. So it is a spiritual programme, perhaps one of the more successful spiritual movements in history. It's not a church, but it is definitely a spiritual movement. The eleventh step is to raise your conscious contact with God when they feel ready for that. Maybe not in the very first step when they are in desperation, but at a certain point they are very ready to hear about meditation and they are very keen to hear about it and they respond to it very intuitively, I think. So we have quite regular retreats for people in AA regular meditation groups. We even have a website for the eleventh step.

The recovering alcoholic is well aware of stages of growth or recovery as they call it. They are not ashamed about it. At a certain point, they feel not so much proud as deeply grateful and thankful. That's why they speak a lot about it among themselves, and are happy and generous about sharing it with others when somebody comes to the AA group for the first time, walking in still drunk perhaps or on the point of self-destruction. They can be sure that whatever group in the world they walk in to they will receive a loving and warm welcome. Let's hope that people in our churches would feel the same warm welcome when they walk in for the first time.

So it is possible to see that the stages of growth in our healing, in our growing up spiritually, are themselves ways of glorifying God. "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." St Irenaeus goes on to say that the life of the human being is the vision of God, which again brings us back to this idea of contemplation as the ultimate goal of life.

Contemplation is the vision of God.



In Romans 12 St Paul says:

My friends, I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to him, a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then will you be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect.

So what is he saying here? He is saying that in Christian prayer we offer a living sacrifice of ourself: "your very selves". It's not about external sacrifice or making a promise in order to get a reward. Not bargaining with God, but the gift of self, which is the only gift we can give God, the free gift of self that brings us to a higher level of existence.

So this is prayer as we see it in this passage. And it is only *this* kind of prayer that is fit for his acceptance. Otherwise we remain in a pagan attitude of bargaining with God or offering external sacrifices. This is the worship, he says, offered by mind and heart. The integration of mind and heart is the unification of the human person and the self-offering of prayer.

Then he tells us: "Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world." So what is he saying here? Detach from the ways in which the world has hooked you to its own values, to its own compulsions, to its own way of seeing things. Free yourself from these patterns. This is about re-writing the patterns of our mind when you give up smoking, when an alcoholic gives up drink, when we break an addiction. We know that the difficulties of breaking an addiction are not only psychological but even physiological. The

mind, the brain itself has to be rewritten if addictions are to be broken (prayer rewrites the patterns of our mind) and has to be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

So prayer changes us radically, rewrites and re-patterns us. And then he says: "Then you will be able to discern the will of God. And to know what is the right thing to do." Very interesting here because he is saying that this insight into what we should do, into what God's will is for us, comes about through this process of change. We have to open ourselves to radical renewal if we are to be given this insight into God's will.



4

Map of the Journey

Let's just look at one other way of seeing this journey of meditation, maybe a little bit more graphic. It is a helpful little model because it brings together the psychological and the spiritual, and relates different stages of the process of learning to meditate with our faith.

I think we remember usually when we first began to meditate. We're told to sit down, close your eyes and start saying the mantra. You might, like I did, not understand it very well but you feel attracted to the simplicity of it, to the immediacy of it, to the attractive poverty of spirit that it offers us. The utter simplicity of it might attract you and so you start. Then you think it's going to be easy. To your disappointment perhaps you discover it is not that easy. Your mind is constantly distracted by your mental activity, your thinking about what you've got to do for the rest of the day, phone calls you forgot to make, the stuff you have to buy at the shops, things you saw on television, fantasies, old anxieties, niggling little feelings coming back into your mind. And you think: my goodness, this is a waste of time. And many people give up at that stage. You're less likely to give up if you feel that you're meditating within a tradition of wisdom that can help you understand what you're going to experience, and also if you have others to support you.

Spiritual friendship is a very important part of the spiritual journey. So if you have some understanding of the journey you are making, and if you have some support (that's why I recommend meditation groups), you may continue. Or you may stop; you may stop for a few weeks, a few months, a few years. Then you remember that old hunger for something deeper, for something more simple, for a closer intimacy with God. That may come back, maybe through a crisis, maybe just as a matter of time, and you come back to it. You pick it up again. For most people, that's how we begin; I did, certainly. You begin, you stop; you begin, you stop. The

reason it took me so long is I didn't have any support when I was first trying to meditate on my own. It's very difficult to do this entirely on your own.

So let's say we continue after many stops and starts. The mantra begins to go deeper, takes us deeper. And it brings us to another level of consciousness. This we might call the hard drive of our consciousness. This is where everything is recorded deep down in our memory banks even in the cells of our bodies where memory is held. And a lot of the files that are recorded down here are still open files; they haven't been closed. They may be experiences of grief that we didn't fully express, or there may be experiences of loss or betrayal or disappointment or shame. Things we did wrong but we never spoke about or, things we have allowed to go into the unconscious, or to go out of sight, put them under the carpet. But they're still there. And everything that is hidden will be brought to light. So don't meditate unless you want to throw the light into all the corners. And then, the healing work takes place. Christ is a healer and what needs to be healed, will be healed.

There are distractions here of a different kind. Some of these, you are not thinking about I've got to do sixteen things tomorrow, morning, and of the sixteen things you didn't do yesterday. These are deeper memories and issues to do with our history and our privacy. I would say, most of the time, by far most of the time, this healing is done without you realising it. It is not as if you are sitting there doing meditation and you suddenly get overwhelmed by some ancient memories. If you were a borderline psychological case, that might happen. In which case, you might need to have somebody sitting beside you to hold your hand. In most cases the psyche manages this process fairly well, just as our immune system handles us pretty well.

So a lot of this healing and integration is being done in the unconscious. You may go through a period where you do feel a certain restlessness or irritability, or maybe a certain kind of sadness or a grieving, and you don't know what it is, but you go through it. You don't have to sit there and analyse it to death. You do your

meditation, you get up, and you go back to work. You plant the seed in the ground, you go to bed at night and get up in the morning, and it grows; how you do not know. Get on with it. Sometimes something may bubble up into the surface and you suddenly start thinking about a relationship or something in the past that made you sad or angry or disappointed. And you might suddenly catch yourself thinking about it. These may be things you want to talk about with other people. But most of the time, in most cases, if you meditate regularly and moderately (two meditation periods a day is a fairly moderate dosage), then you'll find that this healing work is done quite normally.

Then the mantra takes you deeper, and it brings you to what *The Cloud of Unknowing* calls the naked awareness of yourself. The naked awareness of yourself. I think it is as if you meet a wall and it's the wall of your ego. It's just that sense of separation from other people and from God and even from your true self. That is what the ego is about. The ego's job, in a way, is to protect us, to keep us separate or to individuate us. The ego begins at a very young age, about two years old. A young child will start at that young age to push away its mother and to negate his mother's orders, begins to flex its little ego.

The ego builds up over the years. It builds up with all sorts of memories, little bricks. We build a wall. And *The Cloud of Unknowing* says that when we hit the wall of this naked awareness of self, we meet the sorrow of existence. This isn't depression. This is not being miserable. It is the sadness that is inherent in life when we can't break through. It's like when you are talking to somebody and you see they are isolated and you want to reach out to them and you can't. Or it may work the other way round; you feel nobody can reach you. It's the sorrow of existence that arises from our state of separation or isolation. At this point, we are still saying the mantra but we are not dealing with distractions of either the first or the second level, but the source of distraction itself, the sense of separation from God, from my true self.

So what do we do? We just sit; we just sit there in faith. We persevere. And then a little brick falls off the wall. One day, we feel a freedom that we didn't have before or an insight that wasn't there before. It is as if we can see just a little bit through the wall. The wall is still there. It's still blocking you, but you can see through it. And more and more little bricks begin to fall out of the wall as these fruits of the Spirit begin to form, begin to manifest.

Then, in God's own time, how we do not know (remember Jesus says we cannot observe the Kingdom happening, you can't say look here it is or there it is, because in fact the Kingdom is within you and among you) in God's own time, we are led beyond the wall. On this side of the wall, we feel the sorrow of existence; on the other side of the wall, we feel the joy of being. And joy is the test.

Here, as John Main describes it, at this frontier of our being, we meet a guide, and we recognise this guide as Jesus, but in a new way as in the Resurrection stories. We are now in the realm of the Spirit and the Spirit is boundless. So we have a sense of infinite expansion of being, the agape, the boundless love of God. And our journey which began as a narrowing, now takes on an expanding dimension into the Father: with Jesus in the Spirit to the Father.

It isn't that Jesus was not present to us at the other stages. Jesus is our companion on the way all the time but, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we don't recognise him half the time. We're talking about him a lot of time, especially priests, and we're thinking about him a lot of the time, even talking to him a lot of the time, but we don't recognise him all the time.

He is present to us in our distracted daily mind and daily affairs, and he is present to us in the healing process. And he is present to us on this side of the wall which *The Cloud of Unknowing* says is our cross. This is our daily cross. We have to pick up this sorrow of existence, our ego, every day and carry it.

So he is with us at all these stages. But there is a kind of recognition, an opening of our understanding or the opening of the eye of the heart, which happens in the Spirit only. And this then gives us a new perspective over the whole of this journey.

It's here that we begin to live the Beatitudes. And the important thing is to see this as all part of one process. It's an open-ended process. We don't know where we come from, but we can identify the starting point and all of this is connected. We need to sense that all aspects of our history, of our experience, are part of the same story, even the bits that don't make any sense or the meaningless parts.

It isn't that suddenly when this happens that we stop being distracted. Of course we stay distracted. Maybe less distracted, maybe we're less worried by our distractions, but we are still human, we're still busy.

You might be able to handle the distractions better and you might be able to make some changes in your lifestyle which will make you less distracted. It is not that the healing process stops. We are always going to be in need of healing. Some of our wounds are very deep, thorns in the flesh that we carry with us for the rest of our life, like St Paul, and we still get hurt. So we are constantly in need of healing, and the ego is going to be with us in some form as long as we are in this body.

So it isn't that these different stages or phases are left behind, but they're integrated into a much bigger experience of the whole as this spiritual dimension opens up for us.



5 Stages and States

When we're thinking about the journey, the spiritual pilgrimage, what I find helpful is to make a distinction between stages and states.

A state of mind is constantly changing. You may have a state of mind in your meditation which is very peaceful and joyful, integrated – a state of apatheia. But then the next day or the next meditation session, that has gone and you find yourself just facing a lot of distractions and dryness. So states of mind change. We know we can be very peaceful and happy and think life is going along quite smoothly, then you get a phone call or you get some angry person who crosses your path, an annoying person, and your state of mind is shattered and you're filled with irritability and anger and sadness. So states of mind by definition are variable like the weather.

Stages are different. Stages are like birthdays; they're milestones. You pass them and you don't go back to them. They are markers of the fact that the journey we're on is going in one direction. We don't go back. Often we don't recognise the stage in our life until we have already passed it. Stages require a more reflective, more a right-brain type of awareness to recognise. States of mind just impose themselves on us.

To be free from being dominated by states of mind so that we're not at the mercy of our emotions or our moods, that is part of the healthy spiritual life. You're not tossed hither and thither by your moods or states but there is something deeper, a greater groundswell, or a greater stability in you that keeps you afloat, keeps you balanced, even during stormy days.

And I think that transformation of consciousness, that the Gospel speaks about and that meditation triggers and releases, gives us this sense of stability, of stillness on the journey. So although we are moving and changing we also feel centred, and we

come to realise more and more with the eyes of faith that that centredness that keeps us grounded, that keeps us still, is nothing less than Christ himself.



6 Self-Knowledge

In this journey of meditation, the significant turning point is the end where we come to recognise Jesus more clearly, more personally in our experience, and we realise that he has been accompanying us all the way and all the time. But there are degrees of recognition, and these degrees of recognition in the Christian contemplative tradition are degrees of self-knowledge. We know God better as we know ourselves better.

That's why St Augustine says: "May I know myself so that I may know you." That's why he wrote the *Confessions*. On another occasion Augustine says: "A man must first be restored to himself, so that making himself as it were a stepping stone he can rise from himself to God." So finding yourself, self-appropriation, self-realisation, self-knowledge, these are not just psychological states, they are essential to our spiritual progress.

Our self-knowledge is not just some private interior thing. Our self-knowledge is awakened by the Divine knowledge of us, by God's love of us, by being touched, awake. It's just like being woken up by someone shaking you saying, "Wake up!" It's then that we open our eyes and see that we are seen, and know that we are known, and we can love because we are loved. This story I think illustrates what I was trying to say, from the Gospel of John in the Resurrection appearance to Mary of Magdala.

The disciples went home again but Mary stood outside the tomb weeping, feeling separated, [the sorrow of existence]. And as she wept, she looked into the tomb, and saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had lain. They asked her, "Why are you weeping?" She answered, "They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where

they have laid him." With these words she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not recognise him. Jesus asked her, "Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Thinking it was the gardener, she said, "If it is you sir who removed him, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away." Jesus said, "Mary." She turned and said to him, "Rabuni", which is Hebrew for teacher. "Do not cling to me," said Jesus, "for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go to my brothers and tell them I am ascending to my Father, your Father and to my God, your God". Mary of Magdala went to tell the disciples. "I have seen the Lord", she said, and gave them his message.

So we see in this story much of what I am trying to say here. We also see that the fruit of the Resurrection is that we are sent back to live this life day by day in a new way. In the same way, the prayer that brings us into this moment of recognition, which is an ongoing moment of recognition, has to be integrated into our daily life.

I'd like to take this theme a little bit further in a scriptural way by looking at two passages in which we see Jesus knowing an individual and bringing about a change in the life of that individual through his deep and intimate knowledge of them.

Mark 10:17. Jesus was as usual starting out on a journey. A stranger runs up and kneels before him. He asks,

"Good teacher, what must I do to win eternal life?" And Jesus says to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false evidence, do not defraud, honour your father and mother." "But teacher," he replied, "I have kept all these since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him; he loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go sell everything you have; give to the poor and you will have treasure in

heaven. Then come and follow me.” With these words, his face fell and he went away with a heavy heart because he was a man of great wealth.

We do not know what happens to the rich young man but what happens next, as always, is ourselves. How does this story speak to us? How do we respond? How do we understand this call of Jesus? A few verses later, at the end of Ch 10:

They came to Jericho, and as he was leaving the town with his disciples and a large crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar was seated at the roadside. Hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Son of David, Jesus have pity on me.” Many of the people told him to hold his tongue. But he shouted all the more, “Son of David have pity on me.” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called the blind man. “Take heart,” they said, “get up. He’s calling you.” At that, he threw off his cloak, jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” “Rabbi,” the blind man answered, “I want my sight back.” Jesus said to him, “Go, your faith has healed you.” And at once he recovered his sight and followed him on the road.

How do we put these two stories together? Clearly, it’s partly about spiritual vision. The rich young man was blind, could not see his moment, his opportunity. The blind beggar Bartimaeus was blind physically, but he could see; the eye of his heart was open. Happy are the pure of heart for they shall see God. Poverty of spirit. He is poor. He has nothing; he’s a beggar. He even takes off his dirty old cloak. The decisive knowledge that brought about the restoration of his vision is Jesus’ knowledge of him, his recognising him, and the self-knowledge of the blind man because he knows what he wants. He knows exactly what he wants, and he can express it. It’s only when we really are in touch with our own deepest needs that we can receive grace, otherwise we are scattered in our desires. We have

so many desires that they conflict with each other. We don’t know what we really want. We want one thing today and another tomorrow. We feel tension because we have irreconcilable desires.

There’s only thing to do when we are in this unhappy state, of conflicted desire like the rich man. He wanted eternal life, didn’t he? But he also couldn’t let go of his riches. So he went away sad. Sorrow is the result of unfulfilled desire, and unfulfillable desire as long as we are wanting irreconcilable things. What is called for at this stage is to go deeper in yourself, to come to self-knowledge and to discover what you want. You may be surprised. You may not even want what you want, may not want to want it, like the rich young man, but at least we know what we want. And if we really understand that place of truth and poverty and purity in ourselves, then we have found peace and joy, and we accept what it is we want.



Stages of Saying the Mantra

In many Eastern traditions of meditation practice, the practice is paying attention to the breath. But in the Christian tradition, meditation, the practice that leads us to the heart, has normally been the word: saying the word and listening to the word, the mantra. This is the normal method of deeper prayer, contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition, picking up and collecting the whole great theology of the Word of God, and allowing the word through our own attention, through our own act of faith and receptivity, our own fiat – let it be done, allowing the word – to take flesh in us, which opens us to the mystery of what is already present in our hearts, the continuous prayer of Christ.

Yesterday I was describing the stages, levels of consciousness we pass through on the journey of meditation. There is another way we could look at this in terms of the practice of meditation. We're saying the mantra at all these stages, but we're not saying the mantra in the same way as the journey unfolds. It's about a faithful repetition rather than a mechanical repetition. A faithful repetition means that something is alive and growing or organic, and it changes. Life is about change. So you could say that right at the very beginning you are *saying* the mantra, saying the word. And you are constantly being knocked off-course by your distractions, and coming back to the word. It seems as if you're saying it in the head, but your head is like a tree full of monkeys jumping around, chattering and screaming at each other, endless conversations going on in the head. You may get distracted by a sense of failure. At the first stage we are saying the mantra with constant interruption and a feeling of failure and not doing very well.

But as we progress, as we stay faithful to it, it's more as if we *sound* the mantra. It's beginning to take root in the heart, and it moves in a subtle way as it were from the head to the heart. When

we start to meditate we are much more in the head than we probably thought. And It's quite a shift to move the centre of consciousness from the head to the heart. It becomes a little easier to say as you're sounding the mantra in your heart. The distractions may still be there but they're no longer bothering you so much or interrupting you so often. You can say the mantra and pay attention to it much better, even though the distractions are in the back of your mind.

The purpose of meditation is not primarily to get rid of all your distractions. You may have moments free of distractions which might bring you to some pure prayer. But that isn't the way you judge your meditation. If you're busy and running around all day and you've got your problems to deal with, you will have distractions, some times more than others. So don't judge your meditation by your distractions.

Then again at this stage it's more as if you're *listening* to the word and this is where we really begin. For as we listen to the word and take the attention off ourselves, we're moving closer to this place of silence where the word of God, Jesus, can be recognised, when our attention is ready, when we are ready. In God's own time, the mantra leads us into complete silence, and that's pure grace. Contemplation is grace; it's gift. We don't *do* contemplation. God *gives* contemplation. We do meditation because that's our work, our way of preparing ourselves, our way of being ready, our way of unpacking the parcel, unwrapping the parcel.

Our saying the word takes us through stages. At first, maybe it seems a bit mechanical, up there at the top. But it becomes more subtle and eventually leads us to a very subtle, silent place.

Now, let's put this in a practical way. You are saying the mantra, and you find yourself in a very silent and very quiet place. It's a beautiful place to be. You feel very calm, very peaceful, you feel the joy of this peace, and you may say to yourself: "This is wonderful, the sky is clear now, I have no thoughts." But the thought "I have no thoughts" is a thought. So you're not quite there yet.

We don't get there on our own steam. The final step is always grace, the gift of the Lord at the right moment. So our response to

that moment or that time of quiet and peace and tranquillity is not to stop saying the word, because that will mean we get back behind the steering wheel. We are in control again. My ego is saying, "That's it. OK I want this experience; I'm going to have it and enjoy it. I don't need to be poor anymore; I've got what I paid for." And then we lose it of course. This is why Cassian says, repeat the word, the formula, continuously ceaselessly. That's the tradition of this way of prayer. You find it everywhere where it is described in the Christian tradition: Say it ceaselessly, continuously. But you will say it at deeper levels and more subtle and more gentle levels.

The final step, as I said, moving into complete silence, we don't have to bother about that. We can just allow the fruits to appear in our life, and be grateful for that and wonder at that, but the rest is in the Lord's gift.



8 Acedia, Apatheia, and Agape

Another way of looking at the stages of the journey is described in the teachings of the Desert monks. They recognised that at the beginning of any new journey you may feel a lot of enthusiasm. There is a natural enthusiasm and hopefulness which we feel at the beginning of any new commitment, any new venture. So there is something in this stage of enthusiasm that energises us and empowers us to commit ourselves.

But then we run into difficulties. Acedia is a warning sign. When acedia happens, this enthusiasm diminishes and we begin to see the problems. We see the challenges. Spiritually speaking, the Desert Fathers described acedia as a feeling of discouragement. The energy that led us in the first stage of enthusiasm seems to run out. The prayer just becomes hard and dry.

There are many levels of this acedia. It may last for a few minutes or may last for a few months. St John of the Cross describes it as the dark night. And I often think if you are feeling depressed, one of the best things you could do is to read *Dark Night of the Soul*. It cheers you up. It really does, because he so cleverly describes and identifies what you are feeling, and he puts it into a context of faith and encourages you to trust that this is God's work in you. It doesn't feel like it because God seems a hundred miles away; you may even doubt if God really exists at all. It is a struggle. You have to persevere through those times of discouragement. The grass looks greener on the other side; you look for some other activity or some other place to go.

In terms of the meditation, we will experience this. Soon after I had gone into the monastery, I'd come through one phase of acedia and my meditation became what I described or thought of at that time as very good. I was having very good meditations, a very strong

sense of enlightenment and peace. I was taken by surprise by this experience, but I think also I had a kind of possessiveness or a kind of pride in it, maybe, and I didn't speak to anyone about it. Eventually I did speak to John Main about it, and I think I was a little nervous about speaking about it, letting somebody else know about it, thinking I might lose it or something. As I heard myself talking about it, I realised that I was possessive and I was a little proud. John actually didn't have to say anything to me. He just looked at me and smiled. And I knew where I was. He said, "Well, that's wonderful. Accept this as a phase that you're going through. It has something to teach you, you will gain some insight from it, but don't really expect that it will be like this all the time." I was a bit resentful in a way when he said that because I would have liked it to be like that all the time, but I also knew that it wouldn't, and it was good to be told that, to be warned.

So we go through stages and through cycles. Acedia is a very difficult dry period, a desolation. As I said, it may be short-lived or at sometimes it could be more intense. Everybody is going to go through it to one degree or another. So the Desert Fathers said to be prepared for this, it's natural. And then they said what is the cure for this?

One of the cures for it is to talk about it. So the monks who would be suffering from acedia would go to one of their elders who had a bit more experience and could put it into perspective for them, and they would talk about it. So there was a kind of spiritual friendship, having other people whom you can really trust to express what you are feeling, and who will guide you. And then having spoken about it to the abba, to the older monk, the older monk would then say, "Now go back to your cell, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything." In other words, keep going. Don't give up. That's the advice we need for anything, isn't it? You need help, at times we all need help, but we also need to be encouraged to persevere.

Then, they said that the next stage you come to is apatheia. Apatheia is another Greek word that means literally beyond passion.

It's not the same at all as apathy, which is a negative state. For the Desert tradition, the word passion meant *dis*-order, problems, hang-ups, anxieties, neuroses. So passions meant those states of mind, that we call the seven deadly sins. Pride, anger, gluttony, despair and so on. Those were passions. So to be without passion, to be free from these disordered states, was to be in harmony. So they called apatheia, the health of the soul. This is when you are working in a beautiful, synchronised way. Your body, your mind, your spirit, your work, your inner life are together, and everything is going smoothly, and you feel energy. The state of Apatheia is a healthy other-centred energy. You're no longer collapsed into yourself in loneliness, depression and egotism. But you're energised to turn away from yourself to other people, you love the service that you can give to other people. So apatheia is a natural result that will come just as the sun will eventually shine after a day of rain. It is a natural stage in the cycle.

Then, they said, the child of apatheia is agape. Agape is the word most frequently used in the New Testament and translated as love. There are other words for love – eros, filia, friendship – but agape is the love of God, a love that knows no bounds. The love that shines on good and bad alike, it is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. This is the love with which Jesus tells us we should be loving each other – in the same way that God loves us, with this boundless love.

So the child of apatheia is not just a little private, spiritual bliss like I was experiencing at the beginning of my journey, that little bit of private enlightenment that you kind of hang on to for yourself. The goal of it is agape, which is the natural effusion of God's love within you outwards, bathing you and bathing everyone that you meet as well.

We have to see that this is a cycle. We do not just go through it once. There is a repetition, in the cycle of our spiritual progress. What accepting the cyclical nature of our spiritual journey does is to give us detachment because we know that things are moving all the time. And we go with the flow. We don't become attached either to

the negative or to the positive experiences. We go through them, and we are going deeper towards that union that is the goal, towards that vision of God which is the goal.

Going through this cycle also gives us a little bit of experience. You know when you are going through a period of acedia, and you just accept it. If it's not too intense, you just go through it. If you need help, you will find the help that you need. But you know that it won't last forever. The more you accept it and keep going through it, keep sitting in your cell, and keep the meditation going, the sooner you will come out again into a new and a deeper stage of apatheia. And it is from that experience, being able to recognise the stages, that you're going through, that you can be of some use to others. We can only teach from experience.

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Transcript of selected talks from a retreat for
Malaysian priests led by Laurence Freeman OSB
in Penang in Sep 2010 The complete talks are
available in a set of 4 audio CDs titled:
Christian Meditation: The Essential Teaching



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