

Seeing Clearly – Acting with Compassion

An Introduction to Meditation in the Christian Tradition

At the heart of Christianity there is an ancient contemplative practice that can change a person and change the world. That has been my experience since I was introduced to meditation 30 years ago by Benedictine monks, when I was living at Prinknash Abbey.

Sadly, most people have no idea that Christianity has anything to say about this, or that it has its own vibrant contemplative tradition. Yet, while we continue to see the numbers of those attending church services decline, we are surrounded by clear and growing signs of people's deep longing for the depth-dimension of Christianity and life generally.

In the very short time together today I'd like to say something about this tradition. We'll have a short period of practice together and hopefully a few minutes for any comments or questions at the end.

The practice I'm going to describe is very ancient, and very simple. It's not the preserve of specialists, and it can't be "owned" by one group or another. I know children of five, leaders of global businesses and members of the House of Lords who use the same, simple practice. The wisdom and healing processes of meditation are available to everyone, because the fundamental workings of the human mind are the same for all of us. It's profoundly egalitarian.

The practice doesn't say "*believe this*" or "*believe that*". It says "*come and taste for yourself*" ("Come and see" John 1:39). Its focus is *not* about seeking to live an extraordinary life - in the many forms we like to imagine this for ourselves *and for others*. Life, it turns out, is quite extraordinary enough. Rather, meditation is about *living our ordinary lives, extraordinarily well*. It's about healing, wellbeing, fullness of life.

What do I mean by 'meditation'? I simply mean a practice which uses the mind's ability to focus narrowly in the present, that we might return to the fullness and wonder of what is already here. It is an ancient way of silent prayer, described by one of the most influential and insightful teachers of the early church, Evagrius of Pontus, as "The raising of the heart and mind to God – through the laying aside of thoughts."

THE NEED

In the Christian contemplative tradition, all suffering and injustice is seen as arising through our alienation and estrangement from our true nature. You might say that the greatest cause of conflict between us is our simple ignorance of who we are. The 'cure', to paraphrase St. Augustine, comes through the gradual process of being restored to ourselves.

Much of contemporary culture and education is directed towards the cultivation of the calculating, conceptualising surface mind. An overwhelming priority and status is given to this important but surface aspect of ourselves.

While necessary to negotiate and enjoy daily life (I couldn't speak to you today without it and none of us could hold down our jobs), an over preoccupation with the *content* of this surface life has serious risks attached to it. Almost without realizing it, our attention can become fixated on the flow of thoughts and feelings that arise in us moment by moment. All too easily, we can come to believe that this flow of thoughts and feelings is who we are. And if the narratives and pictures we use to make sense of our lives conflict with the narratives and pictures that others hold? Well, we all know what *can and does* routinely happen.

We forget that thoughts and feelings are like waves on the surface of the sea, and become so preoccupied with the waves that we lose all sense of the depths that lie beneath them. Captivated and fascinated by these waves, we become like small boats trying to navigate the swell, often finding ourselves tossed about, and occasionally overwhelmed. Many people experience this as living lives that are distracted and dispersed, often involving a sense of separateness, as if they are living at a distance from themselves, from those around them and from God.

But there can be no distance from God, no separation from the One in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). To paraphrase St. Augustine, God is never absent. Rather, it is we who are often absent from ourselves.

We need to come home. We need to be present in the present¹. And the meditation we will practice today is a simple way of being present in the present: with ourselves, with each other, with God. Meditation is a path of homecoming. To practice is to allow ourselves to be gathered, unified, that we may realise our essential union with God².

Now, before I say anything else, I'd like to mention something deeply counter-cultural about Christian meditation. When we meditate, we do not seek to acquire anything, any more than a vine branch needs to seek the vine. Rather, we are seeking to remove the veils that obscure our true nature, which is that we are already one with the One who ceaselessly gives us life. As the Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, put it towards the end of his life:

"...in prayer we discover what we already have. You start from where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realise you are already there. We already have everything but we don't know it and don't experience it. Everything has been given to us. All we need to do is experience what we already possess."

HISTORY

Most of us, I think, will have experienced the dramatic effect of unrestrained mental activity and noise. This was very well known to the early Christian contemplatives of the Egyptian and Syrian deserts. The desert Fathers and Mothers, as they have come to be known, found in Jesus' handling of his own temptation in the desert a model of how to respond to interior noise and cultivate stillness and peace in the face of it.

They noticed that each time Jesus was tempted with a certain thought - such that he might perform a miracle or become tremendously powerful – he refused to enter into an internal dialogue with the

¹ The present is, of course, the only place we can ever actually be, even if we spend most of our mental lives elsewhere.

² The philosopher Martin Heidegger writes that the earliest meaning of the term *logos* was not, as it is often translated, 'word' or 'speech' or 'rationality', but 'to collect', 'to gather' and 'collecting-collectedness'. The Word, Christ, comes to gather, to collect, and return with us to the Father.

tempting thought. Instead, Jesus simply recited scripture, and kept reciting scripture for as long as was necessary. Following this example of Jesus, these early Christian contemplatives developed the practice of reciting a prayer word or phrase to help them stand back from the pull of their thoughts, that they might enter into silent prayer.

THERAPEUTIC BENEFITS

Learning to meet our thoughts and feelings directly and as they are (a simple thought or feeling), without immediately reacting and embroidering them with commentary, can give us a powerful sense of liberation and possibility for radical change in our lives. The confines of our mental and emotional world fall away, as we are led through successive doorways of practice. We start to see beyond *what we do* – and the truth of *who we are* starts to unfold.

Let me bring this down to earth by telling you about a brilliant lawyer I used to work with. We'll call him David. David was regularly afflicted by severe bouts of painful anxiety. His clients loved him. He was technically brilliant and always gave excellent, detailed advice. But despite being a very good lawyer, David regularly suffered crushing waves of anxiety and was endlessly worried about making a mistake and some calamity ensuing. David just thought this was who he was and how his life would always be.

One day, when we were talking about this in my office, he raised his hands in despair and said "I'm just an anxious person!" I knew David pretty well, so I took a risk and said "No, you're not." For a moment he looked furious, but managed to ask me what on earth I was talking about. So, I asked him if he could take a few deep breaths, still his mind a little, and look at the anxious thought. He said he could. Then I suggested to him that if he could *observe* the anxious thought, he couldn't *be* the anxious thought. He was looking at it. He was suffering the impact of these anxious thoughts. But he wasn't the thought.³

And so, you can see how a very fundamental question can arise. If we are not our thoughts and feelings, but the person observing them, *what does that person look like?*

This was where David began his meditation. But before too long, David was able to recognise and begin to step back from the negative reactive narratives he routinely wrapped around them, about himself and the world, and so calm the waves of anxiety that had invaded so much of his life. Through his daily practice, David was cultivating the skill which the earliest teachers in the Christian tradition called 'watchfulness':

- he learnt to look directly at thoughts and feelings with stillness; and
- he learnt to let go of the reactive commentary he used routinely to wrap around the feeling of anxiety.

Steadily, quietly, the practice of meditation began to root David in an inner stability he had never known before. And as he continued with his practice, this inner stability continued to blossom and reveal the depth of its roots in God. He became increasingly aware of a silent, peaceful spaciousness within himself. And steadily, from this silent, spacious foothold, he started to experience his relationships with others and the world in a completely new light.

³ For anyone who might wish to reflect on this a little further: awareness can never fully 'see' or 'grasp' itself. Another way of putting this, is that the subject that knows can never be an object to itself, just as an eye can know it's seeing but not see itself. In this sense, mind is its own veil: a veil which, as the eye of our heart becomes progressively uncluttered, reveals itself as a Veil of Light.

As people come to see the difference between a simple thought and the commentary that we so often wrap around it, they often experience a sense of deep release and inner calm, which those around them can also feel. We come to realise that beneath all the mental and emotional noise and turmoil we face in life, lies a depthless depth of radiant peace.

For good reason this blossoming of awareness has been likened to a sunrise in the mind. For in the Light of this sunrise we come to know that this depthless depth of radiant peace is actually who we are, our true life, hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3).

ULTIMATE PURPOSE

Why should we practice?

To See Clearly

We meditate to cooperate with God's wish that his silent, radiant presence within us becomes not just *a* reality for us, but *the* reality in our life – rooting us, guiding us, filling our lives with meaning. To meditate is to leave the shallows and push out into the deep, to answer the call to come home. And we do this by turning away from the passing, ephemeral things in life, and towards what is eternal.

We meditate to be gathered and led to our own deep centre, the temple of our heart, where God dwells.

To Act with Compassion

We meditate to establish peace in ourselves, that we may be present - present 'with' and present 'for' each other. That we may, in the words of Rowan Williams, “be capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom: freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them”. That we may, in the radiant words of Corinthians 2, become the fragrance, the aroma of Christ in the world for those around us and all creation.

Meditation creates a space of opportunity, so we may better see those around us, their needs, their mysterious beauty and dignity. It builds community as it disposes us to the peace that undermines and transfigures all that divides us, and lays bare who we are - members of one family.

PRACTICE

It's worth saying at the outset that although the actual method of meditation is extremely simple, it can be hard work. We are learning to pay attention – to attend. It sometimes helps to think of it as a little like taking your head to the gym. You can expect to have to do some work.

For today, simply understand meditation as a practice which uses the mind's ability to focus narrowly in the present. Our only work is to return to our practice each time we notice we are caught up in some thought or feeling and distracted. Being distracted is to be expected. We should not mind this or struggle with it. We're not trying to have a 'blank mind' without any thoughts. That is a very unhelpful myth about meditation. It only happens when someone hits us very hard over the head!

Rather, in turning back to our practice (over and over and over) we are gently *changing our relationship with what goes on in our surface mind*. We are training the mind – which, like a puppy,

prefers to run about wherever it wants, chewing on whatever it fancies and which, without training, can cause a great deal of trouble.

During our time of meditation, we try and follow Jesus' teaching not to worry about our life, our past and our future. All we need to do is make the decision to set out on the journey, and keep making it. The invitation comes from God and God brings everything about. Our work is simply to cooperate with the process that God leads us through.

Think for a moment about gardening. We often talk about growing this or that. "I love to grow radishes". "I grew a wonderful crop of potatoes last summer". It's fine to talk like this, up to a point. As long as we remind ourselves from time to time that *we don't actually grow anything at all*. Things are quite happy to grow themselves.

Meditation, like gardening, is really about collaboration. Our work is never more than helping to create the best conditions for growth to happen.

Remember, we already have everything we need. Our loving intention for God is first of all God's loving intention for us. As we read in Isaiah, "Before you call upon me, I say to you, here I AM."

Let's have a short period of practice together. If you want to root this simple way of prayer into your life, I would recommend starting with 15-20 minutes each day (morning and evening if possible), building up to 30 minutes.

- Make sure you are sitting comfortably, with your back as straight as you are able, with your body still and relaxed but alert.
- Take a few slow, deep breaths to gather your attention and still yourself.
- Choose a word or phrase to recite in your mind, in time with your breathing. For example, the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ..." with the in-breath, "...have mercy on me" with the outbreath. Or a single word. Or just focus on your breath, follow it flowing in and out through your nose.
- We use the word or short phrase simply to help focus the mind and to deal with distractions, to bring body and mind together, to bring us to stillness.
- And when distractions come, don't fight them, and don't be discouraged. This is entirely natural and in fact a good and necessary thing. We are not trying to have a "blank mind" (we don't want to be "mindless").
- Whenever you notice your attention has followed a thought or feeling, just gently take your attention back to the word or phrase, or back to following the breath.
- It's precisely this practice of noticing yourself noticing thoughts and feelings, then gently turning back to the practice, which helps loosen their grip on you.
- And very importantly, do not place any demands or expectations on yourself. You cannot judge or evaluate your meditation, or anyone else's.

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