

Establishing Peace in Ourselves

Meditation and the Discovery of Peace in Daily Life

THE PEACE WE SEEK IS ALREADY HERE

All of us are, in one way or another, searching for meaning, for harmony, for peace.

Outside this room, we are bombarded with a constant stream of messages telling us that in order to be *successful*, in order to have *value*, in order to *matter*, we need to *get hold of* things: qualifications, the right career, money, the right partner, the right house, figure and clothes. Our culture is overwhelmingly about *acquiring* things.

It couldn't be more different with meditation in the Christian tradition. We don't need to acquire anything at all. We just need to realise what is always close at hand.

At the heart of the Christian message is a simple, radical, often challenging and sometimes mind-boggling message: the peace we seek is already here. It is always here, buried in the field of our lives, like a precious jewel. Even if, for a great deal of the time, our lives can feel very far from being peaceful.

In the last talk I quoted some words by the Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, which resonated with many of you and sets out a fundamental principle of Christian meditation, that in prayer (and the simple meditation we will practice today is 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.”¹

The peace we seek is already here.

“Well” you might be thinking, “those are cheery sounding words, Chris. But what might this mean practically for my life?”

And, I want to address this very practically. By suggesting a very simple practice you can use to test everything I'm going to say and explore this for yourselves.

WHY IS THIS PEACE HIDDEN FROM US SO MUCH OF THE TIME?

Why is this peace hidden from us so much of the time? The short answer is, because we cover it over with a veil of mental noise and clutter.

¹ 'The Hidden Ground of Love: The letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns', edited by William H Shannon (page 350).

And then we search for it in the wrong place, as happens in this short tale:

There was an expert diamond thief who only stole the most exquisite of gems. This thief would hang around the diamond district to see who was purchasing a gem, so that later he could pick their pocket.

One day he saw a well-known diamond merchant purchase the jewel he had been waiting for all his life. It was the most beautiful, the most pristine, the purest of diamonds. He was very excited, and so he followed the diamond merchant as he boarded the train, getting into the same compartment. He spent an entire three-day journey trying to pick the merchant's pocket and obtain the diamond.

When the end of the journey came and he hadn't found the gem, he was very frustrated. He was an accomplished thief, and although he had employed all his skills, he still was not able to steal this rare and precious jewel.

When the diamond merchant got off the train, the pickpocket followed him once again. Finally, he just couldn't stand it anymore, and he walked up to the merchant and said, "Sir, I am a renowned diamond thief. I saw you purchase that beautiful diamond, so I followed you onto the train. Though I used all the skills of my art, which have been perfected over many years, I was not able to find the gem. I must know your secret. Tell me, please, how did you hide it from me?"

The diamond merchant replied, "Well, I saw you watching me in the diamond district, and I suspected you were a pickpocket. So, I hid the diamond where I thought you would be least likely to look for it.

In your own pocket.²

We look outside ourselves, when the jewel of peace is all the time in the pocket of our heart. We lose sight of it by covering it with a veil of mental noise and clutter, then look for it in the wrong place, in the wrong way, using the wrong tools.

Remember how Jesus was asked when the Kingdom of God would come, as if it wasn't here, and might suddenly appear at the right time in the future³. He answered, "The coming of the Kingdom cannot be observed, and no one will announce, 'Look, here it is,' or, 'There it is.' For behold, the Kingdom of God is within you".

I think it's easy to pass over how deeply challenging his answer was. It's not going to come, because it's already here. It's not over here, or over there. It's not outside you. It's within.

It can't be observed by the conceptualising mind. It can't be objectified and made into an object of awareness. It is the ground of awareness.

But it can be known. Not by the intellect, but by the heart. By means of a loving intention that has been simplified and has left all concepts by the doorway⁴.

² From 'The Diamond in your Pocket', Gangaji, 2007.

³ Luke 17:20.

⁴ To explore this further, look at Chapter 4 of the 14th century work 'The Cloud of Unknowing'. Clearly the conceptualising mind is an extraordinary gift. It can help us come to the threshold of wonder. But at this threshold it must fall silent, and allow love to take over.

In the last talk I mentioned one of the earliest and most influential definitions of what was called ‘pure prayer’ in the early church. Evagrius of Pontus, the fourth century desert monk who was an extraordinarily subtle and insightful observer of the mind, described prayer as:

“The raising of the heart and mind to God – through the laying aside of thoughts.”

Meditation is a simple way of laying aside thoughts (the veil of mental noise and clutter) so we can be reacquainted with the peace that is always here.

STILLING THE WAVES THROUGH THE LAYING ASIDE OF THOUGHTS

Most of us, for a large part of our lives, move through life simply *reacting* to what is going on around us. We react to life’s events on a sort of auto-pilot, running along well-worn tracks of habit. We are mostly unaware we are doing this, or that our relationship with life could be radically different.

One of the main aims of contemplative training in the early desert tradition was to train the mind not to automatically spin commentary in reaction to simple thoughts and feelings. Evagrius writes about the difference between a simple thought and the superstructure of reactive commentary we can quickly build around it.

What does this look like?

This short monastic tale describes the problem and its consequences very well, I think:

Two monks were walking between monasteries. They came to a ford in a river they needed to cross and saw that it had become swollen by heavy rain.

Standing by the ford was a young woman, crying. Between her sobs, she told the monks that if she couldn’t get across the river to sell some goods at a nearby market, her family would have nothing to eat.

Without hesitation the older monk picked her up, put her on his back, and waded across the river, using his staff to help him.

Once across he put the young woman down and, in her delight, she gave him an enormous hug.

Now, the younger monk was not happy at all with what had happened. And as the two monks continued their journey, the young monk chewed and chewed on his anger until he felt he might burst.

A short distance on, unable to contain himself any longer, he leapt in front of the older monk and shouted, “Have you forgotten your vows! How could you touch that young woman? What sort of monk are you!”

To which the old monk calmly replied, “I saw someone in trouble. I carried her across the river and I put her down.”

“You are still carrying her...”

Let’s imagine we have found some precious time to read, or do something we love and which requires concentration. And then, just as we’ve settled ourselves down to savour this rare bit of quiet time, somebody starts making some sort of noise, humming perhaps.

Very quickly we might be saying to ourselves “Can’t they see what I’m trying to do?” And then we might say a few more things to ourselves, such as “How can they be so selfish? I’m going to give them a piece of my mind!”

Until, before we know it, we have filled our mind so full of our *own* reactive commentary that we can barely hear the humming we initially reacted to. Very quickly, all we are listening to is the self-generated noise in our head.

Does that ring even the smallest bell with anyone?

The initial thought-feeling here might have been annoyance, possibly anger. In other circumstances it might be fear, or jealousy, a rivalry, or perhaps a powerful attraction to something or someone. It doesn’t matter. It’s the reactive piling-on of thoughts on top of thoughts on top of thoughts that’s the issue.

Has anyone ever found that they had a feeling of fear about a situation, wrapped the initial feeling of fear with a deep layer of reactive thoughts, only to discover later that they need not have been so fearful? Or perhaps a person we were powerfully attracted to and impressed with didn’t quite live up to all the gorgeous stories about them we whipped up in our head?

The initial thought-feeling might be a very understandable and entirely natural. But then we grab hold of it and wrap it in reactive commentary, like a snowball running down a hill, getting larger and larger as it picks up more snow, until we are flattened by it.

We can find ourselves having to deal with a monster snowball largely of our own creation!

To a greater or lesser degree, this is very typical of how we encounter our initial simple thoughts and feelings. The early challenge in meditation is learning to meet what is happening (inside or outside our heads) with stillness instead of commentary. Because this self-generated internal commentary is what stands between us and the simple, direct experience of life.

We don’t need to suppress thoughts, or run away or hide from them. We need to learn how to observe them without comment. Because in this way we can dismantle the noisy walls we erect between ourselves and those around us and life, brick by brick.

Now, by way of reminder, when I say ‘meditation’, I simply mean a practice which uses the mind’s ability to focus narrowly in the present, so we might quieten the reactive mind and bring it to stillness.

The simple practice I am talking about today, involves focussing our attention on silently, interiorly reciting a prayer word, or short phrase, in unison with the inflow and outflow of our breath. When we notice that we are distracted by a thought or feeling, we simply bring our attention back to our practice, however many times we need to do so during the time of practice.

Our focus on the prayer word in union with our breathing brings our body and mind together and clears a path for us. Each time we turn back to our practice, we are gently confronting our previously largely unconscious habit of just reacting to thoughts and feelings with yet more thoughts and feelings.

In this way, our practice becomes a refuge, a solid ground on which to stand and meet life, however it is from moment to moment. We learn to meet thoughts and feelings quietly and without comment. Instead of running about watering and feeding them, we simply observe.

We watch them come. We watch them go. It is that simple, that subtle. But we have to work at this.

Good thoughts, bad thoughts, embarrassing thoughts, holy thoughts - the tradition teaches that all distractions during our practice should be met with the same steady silence. We are seeking to centre ourselves in God, not in our thoughts about God or anything else.

We do not need to struggle. What we seek is closer to us than we are to ourselves. All we need do is commit ourselves to the practice and begin. And keep beginning.

Little by little, the deeper aspect of ourselves will disclose itself, like a spring gently pushing its way into our life, permeating it, soaking it.

Our thoughts are like clouds arising and departing in the silent sky of awareness. As we learn to greet them with silence, to look through them and past them without comment, we come to know a great stillness, a depthless depth of silent peace.

We come to realise, like a sunrise within the mind, that we *are* this silent peace.

AN ENCOMPASING PEACE

So, when I wrote 'discovering' in the title of this talk, I meant 'unveiling'.

This unveiling is always a personal discovery, but a personal discovery of what is already here and always has been the case: our union with God, the source of our being, who *is* peace.

Remember the metaphor of the vine in the Gospel of John. A branch is only a branch inasmuch as it is one with the vine. The life that a branch has, it has because that life ceaselessly flows into it from the vine. It has no life of its own. The life it has is continuously given.

We meditate to know we are one with the vine.

To know this in our own experience is the most extraordinary basis for joy and wonder and gratefulness for the gift of life, and the greatest basis for harmony between us. To the branch that knows it is one with the vine, all talk of difference and separateness becomes slightly silly beyond a certain point.

The peace that we encounter is an *encompassing* peace.

How does this encounter with encompassing peace register in our consciousness? For St. Teresa of Avila, it is:

“like rain falling from the sky onto a river or pool. There is nothing but water. It’s impossible to divide the sky water from the land water. When a little stream enters the sea, who could separate out its waters again?”⁵

To discover we are one with the vine, is to discover that the person next to me and all creation is one with the vine.

In Julian of Norwich’s clear and beautiful testimony:

“The love of God creates in us such a unity that when it is truly seen no person can separate themselves from another.”⁶

Ultimately, meditation, is a simple path by which we may dispose ourselves to this gift of union, to be “oned”, as Julian might say.

This is why we meditate: to know the peace that is union, the union that is peace, to let this awareness permeate our lives, that we may become places of peace in the world.



PRACTICE

As I said earlier, while the method of meditation is extremely simple, it can be hard work.

We are learning to pay attention to what we are choosing to pay attention to, not just letting our attention chase whatever it wants. It’s like taking your head to the gym. You can expect to have to do some work.

Being distracted is to be expected. It’s going to happen. We should not mind distractions or struggle with them, but welcome and patiently work through them.

Our only work is to return to our practice each time we notice we are caught up in some thought or feeling and distracted from our practice.

It’s precisely through repeatedly turning back to our practice (over and over and over) that we gently change 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 to 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.

⁵ See ‘The Interior Castle, St, Teresa of Avila’, translated by Miribai Starr (page 270).

⁶ See ‘Julian of Norwich, The Revelations of Divine Love’, translated by Barry Windeatt (page 138).

As we read in the Book of Revelation, “Behold, I have left an open door before you, which no one can close’ (3:8).

No one can close the door. It is here for each of us to walk through.

We already have everything we need to take the journey, and our teacher is within us.

Let’s practice together.

- 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 simply focus on your breath and follow it flowing in and out through your nose. Whatever works for you.
- 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.
- When distractions come (which they will), 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, and you are busy chatting to yourself about it - just gently take your attention back to the word or phrase, or back to following the breath.
- And very importantly, do not place any demands or expectations on yourself. You cannot judge or evaluate your meditation, or anyone else’s.

If you want to root this simple way of prayer into your life, I would practice for 15-20 minutes (morning and evening if possible), building up to 30 minutes.

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