

BEYOND MEDITATION

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The author is a 26-year-old layman. He describes this essay as "my first-hand account, as a young American exploring various forms of meditation, of my encounter with the spiritual tradition of the Discalced Carmelites."

Meditation, recently become a household word, is rapidly becoming a household tool. On top of the many Eastern groups promoting it, such as Transcendental Meditation, Integral Yoga, the Zen Institute, the Divine Light Mission and the Vedanta Society, Western "pop" psychology has incorporated it as a device for "self-realization" and instant relaxation (Sylva Mind Control is one well-known "scientific" purveyor of meditation). Bookstores have writings on the subject in the religion, psychology, and psychic/occult sections, all offering do-it-yourself methods to greater happiness through disciplined control of the mind. Yet meditation is nothing new to America, or especially to the Catholic Church.

Christians have been meditating since the beginnings of the Church, and several sects (such as the Society of Friends—better known as the Quakers) centered their devotional life upon a form of meditation. The mysterious monastic tradition of "contemplation" or "mental prayer" is a highly developed meditation system which begins in what is known as "discursive meditation." This is the regular practice of shutting out the external world and holding the mind upon a pre-chosen devotional subject. Such well-known saints as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Ignatius Loyola were masters and teachers of Christian meditation.

An examination of the history, forms and use of meditation could fill volumes. The Catholic heritage has something valuable to add to the subject, and the current interest holds out a chance to display a unique area of its spiritual treasure to a society hungering for the peace and fulfillment ultimately found in God. It was largely through my exposure to meditation

that I was led back to Christ and the Catholic Church. My experiences should be of interest to the many others learning to "look within."

As an agnostic and "fallen-away" Catholic, a few years back, my efforts to find meaning in a secular materialistic culture were inching me towards despair. Periodic bouts of depression began to show undertones of the suicidal. Fortunately I came to recognize this and, forced to face my condition, I knew my life needed a new direction. At this point a friend happened to give me a couple of books on Hindu and American Indian spirituality. The newness of this approach to religion, after my experience of American suburban Christianity, shocked me into a more serious attitude toward God.

Here was a whole new world opening up to me, in spite of my prejudice towards my inherited religion, as I realized people all over the world from time immemorial have been seeking the "something more" through their approach to the spiritual life.

My skepticism softened. I began a second-hand exploration of the supernatural, reading up on mysticism, psychic experiences, and the whole gamut of popular "spirituality." Many things I came across touched a responsive chord in me, and I tried in small ways to re-orient myself to a more spiritual lifestyle.

I confess much of my interest lay in tales of strange powers and extraordinary experiences, but also I could feel a hidden dimension of my personality craving the light of day. Claims for the realization of the True Self, or inner healing powers, or a vaguely described "God-consciousness" by the power of meditation stirred my curiosity as to what *was* at the center of my mind.

Eventually I tried out a simple do-it-yourself practice, this one from a book on improving poor eyesight written a few decades back by an innovative optometrist named W.H. Bates. He recommended it as a means of relaxing habitual eyestrain.

He advised lying down in a comfortable position and shutting your eyes. You were to focus your attention on your feet, sending mental "commands" for the muscles in the feet to relax, and imagining the commands passing like waves of energy through your body. You were also to imagine that your feet were relaxing, whether or not you could actually feel it happening. After practicing about a minute on your feet, the process would be repeated on the ankles, then the calves, and so on throughout the body, culminating on the head and facial muscles, especially the muscles behind the eyes. By meditating like this twice a day, muscular tension would be reduced and you should become healthier and more relaxed.

Initially it took me about a half-hour to go through the entire sequence, and I had trouble keeping my mind from wandering. But from the very first try I recognized that the exercise significantly relaxed my body and sharp-

ened my mind. Impressed more by the immediate benefits than the other promises, I continued the twice-a-day practice faithfully, progressing steadily in my ability to relax and direct my attention.

At the same time I began meditating, I was experimenting with improving my everyday behavior in ways recommended by various spiritual writers. I believe the meditating helped in these efforts to control my anger, become more detached from the world, and act more responsibly. The calmness and clarity of mind carried over into my normal state, although not with the intensity experienced while actually meditating.

Where I worked I began to discover several other people shared my interests, and we had many philosophical discussions during breaks. One woman had a friend who took a weekend mind control class, similar to Sylva Mind Control, and she told us that the class was soon to hold a new session at a discount price. The two of us signed up for it (as later did several other co-workers).

The class added a new twist to my meditation. It was conducted by a former salesman and sales-motivation trainer from California and spanned days: Thursday and Friday evening and all day Saturday and Sunday. It consisted of a carefully planned mixture of lectures, meditation cycles and group discussions. He presented an eclectic philosophy, leaning towards the positive thinking school with a heavy dose of mystical metaphysics, but it was the meditative technique which was most useful.

It began almost identically as I had taught myself, but, after systematically relaxing the body, went on to relax the emotions and the intellect, associating each with a visualized color, and, proceeding through the colors of the rainbow, had us meditate on peace (green), love (blue), and spirituality (violet). The leader counted backwards through 100, having us go deeper into our relaxed state with each number, finishing with us imagining ourselves present in whatever scene would be for us a "place of perfect peace."

The added element of visualization was intriguing, and our mental pictures were usually spontaneous and vivid, taking on a life of their own with minimal direction from the leader or ourselves. With each meditation cycle we entered our "deeper levels" of mind more quickly and easily, our leader guiding us in creating workshops, advisors, information centers and other mental pictures, through which our "inner self" communicated symbolically. The class was to help us interpret and manipulate these experiences, programming our minds in a healthier, more successful and spiritual direction.

After completing the class I continued my daily meditation, now entering a workshop and talking with imaginary advisors once I had relaxed. This inner self was an excellent advisor in the affairs of my life, constantly confronting me with my deeper feelings. In time it developed into an

intuitive sense which functioned during my normal state as well as when meditating. An interesting scene took place inside of my head during one session, in which my advisors flooded my workshop and merged into my body, claiming I no longer needed their advice.

I continued my reading and self-improvement efforts, tending more toward an ascetic and stoic spirituality (influenced especially by American Indian, yogic and Zen traditions) than the health and wealth ideas of the mind control class. But in my meditation I was beginning to feel stagnant.

I'd often come across the idea that the aim of spiritual development was some superhuman state of mind vaguely described and given names such as "God-consciousness," "God-union" and "cosmic consciousness." Terms like "perfect peace," "total awareness" and "merging into the ocean of the Divine" piqued my curiosity and kept me frustrated because I felt so far from experiencing anything so extravagant. In my meditation it seemed as if nothing at all was happening.

While meditating I often felt peaceful and inclined to relax in a pleasant state of alertness hard to describe. Sometimes I would daydream or utilize my visualization techniques, but at other times something in me was fighting against the exercise of my imagination. I began to regard this resistance as an obstacle to progress and struggled to direct my attention toward experiencing something.

Some writings mentioned visions, ecstasies and occult powers as signs preceding the higher states of meditation, and I wondered if I should be making an effort to develop these things in order to move beyond them. My meditation became more and more strained as I forced myself out of the passive states, hoping that sufficient time and effort would overcome what seemed like inertia.

Fortunately I met a person who led me out of this blind alley, a woman who was a lay member of the contemplative order of Discalced Carmelites. She asked me: "Are you seeking God or strange experiences?" The question jolted me. I had accepted the belief of a personal God and regarded my inner intuition as intimately connected to Him, but somewhere along the line I'd gotten so turned inwards that I forgot God was much larger than myself. I began to realize His domain would not be stormed by force.

A passage from Thomas Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* nails the distinction:

The path to transcendent realization is a path of ascetic self-emptying and "self-naughting" and not at all a path of self-affirmation, or self-fulfillment, or of "perfect attainment . . ." Hence it becomes overwhelmingly important for us to become detached from our everyday conception of ourselves as potential subjects for special and unique experiences, or as candidates for realization, attainment and fulfillment.¹

It was through the influence of this woman that I was introduced to the writings of Merton and began to appreciate directly the Christian tradition of mysticism. There were familiar and unfamiliar elements in it. The concepts of suffering passive purgation, the dark night of the soul, and "contemplation" as a technical term were new to me, yet they opened an area which my soul responded to immediately, though with trepidation.

The works of the famous 16th-century Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, although difficult, captivated me with their ring of sincerity and straightforwardness. He obviously was a man with much first-hand experience in these matters, and his painstaking prudence in giving advice was refreshing to read.

As an example of his careful method of description, a passage which struck home to me because of my current frustration, he describes, in *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*

... some signs and indications by which one can judge whether or not it is the opportune time for the spiritual person to discontinue meditation.

The first is the realization that one cannot make discursive meditation nor receive satisfaction from it as before. Dryness is now the outcome of fixing the senses upon subjects which formerly provided satisfaction . . .

The second sign is an awareness of a disinclination to fix the imagination or sense faculties upon other particular objects . . .

The third and surest sign is that a person likes to remain in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises (at least discursive, those in which one progresses from point to point) of the intellect, memory and will, and that he prefers to remain only in the general, loving awareness and knowledge we mentioned . . .²

He further explained the psychology of this state, offered advice (to rest in the "loving awareness" when it manifests), explained how the mind could still benefit at times from discursive meditation, and warned of the types of imperfections present in such a soul. His treatment is exhaustive, more detailed than I have ever seen.

From this new source of information I followed what advice seemed to pertain to my case, and began a slow process of drawing nearer to the Church for spiritual nourishment.

My beliefs concerning Jesus at that point were ambiguous. It's difficult, perhaps impossible, to take the spiritual life seriously without giving some kind of authority to Jesus. Whether as a teacher, prophet, "descended master," God-conscious saint, personal saviour or the unique incarnation of God, he has impressed men of many cultures for 2000 years as a supreme example of wisdom, charity and religious conviction. Instinctively I regarded the four Gospels as a yardstick of authenticity in spiritual truth,

though without guidance or a faith commitment they were at times hard to interpret. As I sought out Christian speakers and books, I eventually came to see the significance of his title *Christ* and the redemptive work he performed. As obvious as it may seem, fitting Christ and Christianity together was impossible for me until I was able to view it from the perspective of the cross.

But it was the eminent clarity and Christian spirit in the spiritual writings of the great Catholic saints which helped me to appreciate this perspective.

There is another aspect of this literature which perplexes me: although a vital part of our Western cultural tradition, they are still not easily accessible to the general public. At a time when so many have been turning East, toward those laboring to translate the religious idiom of India and the Orient to the masses, there has always been this undercurrent of practical spiritual exercises and advice stemming from the roots of our European-derived society. Perhaps we have needed to shake up our stereotyped images of sanctity by exposure to more exotic varieties, in order to approach our own traditions with a fresh appreciation. Many of our saints were experienced meditators and psychologists as well as humble, self-sacrificing people.

With more leisure time and a more advanced system of communications than the world had a few centuries ago, we now have an ideal situation to promote serious spiritual growth for all. The monastery and convent, of course, still have their place, but no longer must we short-change our spiritual lives because of the demands of lay life. That the situation is ripe is obvious, and there have been signs of a deepening prayer life throughout the American laity.

I hope more efforts will be made to introduce advice from our traditional masters of prayer to the public, and that meditation may be seen as a valid Christian spiritual practice. My haphazard efforts at it have been of enormous benefit to me. I'm sure it could have been even more effective if more closely tied to Christ and the Christian tradition.

I also hope those practicing (or former practitioners of) some form of meditation, becoming puzzled when it begins to pull you in an unexpected direction, perhaps toward the shadow of the cross, will find meaning in these words of Thomas Merton:

... And so, suppose your meditation takes you to the point where you are baffled and repelled by the cloud that surrounds God, Who maketh darkness His covert. Far from realizing Him, you begin to realize nothing more than your own helplessness to know Him, and you begin to think that meditation is something altogether hopeless and impossible. And yet the more helpless you are the more you seem to desire to see Him and to know Him, and the contradiction of your desires and your failure generate in you a painful longing for God which nothing seems able to satisfy.

Do you think your meditation has failed? On the contrary: this bafflement, *this darkness and anguish of helpless desire is the true fulfillment of meditation.*³

NOTES

1. Quote from *Thomas Merton on Prayer*, John J. Higgins, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1973.
2. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, tr. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, ICS Publications, 1975.
3. *Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton, New Directions Books, 1949.

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