

Aberdeen Unitarian Church

THE CHALICE SCHOOL OF CONTEMPLATIVE MEDITATION



SESSION No. 6

PRAYER, MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION

Introduction

In this session we will be looking at three important aspects of the devotional life: prayer, meditation and contemplation - but this time in more depth. Although those three aspects of devotion can in fact be separated, and are often seen as distinct methods which are employed in the spiritual and religious life, they very often crossover and overlap with each other. In other words, when a certain depth of spiritual and devotional practice is achieved, there is often no sharp dividing line between them - a kind of merging takes place. For example, one may be praying, and then suddenly be taken up onto a kind of contemplative state where all words drop away and a profound silence and peace takes over. Also when we look at any aspect of the religious or spiritual life we find that we really cannot avoid those three essential devotional practices. However, as with other aspects of the religious and devotional life there still can be a lot of misunderstanding of what is actually involved. This becomes clear when certain ideas about prayer and other aspects of the spiritual life are brought up - especially the actual effectiveness of such practices. What is clear however, is that we cannot put such practices under a scientific microscope hoping to get some empirical evidence that such things work. It's not something that we can measure. However, many people rightly question the effectiveness of such devotional practices, for example, some questions often asked are: 'How do I know that my prayers are being answered?' 'And, is it all in the mind?' Also, 'is the whole devotional life only in the mind?' But not many people go on to ask, 'how can I develop a better understanding of prayer, meditation and contemplation?'

First let us look at the process of prayer to see what is involved.

PRAYER

Some problems

There is an inherent difficulty with prayer - not so much for those who believe in it, and who use it as a spiritual exercise - but for those who question its efficacy and with it, the God-image to whom prayers are often directed. It is often asked, is there a place for prayer in this present age? It is true that the God-image is beginning to fade - there is a growing doubt and uncertainty in such things. The age of secularism seems to say that man and women no longer need such images. At one time, in holding such views there

had arisen the 'Death of God Theology', which is really a contradiction in terms. But the question, which is then automatically, raised 'is it possible to pray to something higher than oneself i.e. God or some higher Power, when the whole God-image is fast crumbling away'. It is difficult to answer this except to say that there is also a new picture of the universe that is beginning to emerge - and with it a new picture of God. So although the old image is starting to crumble, a new concept of God (in the minds of many people) is now being born - and prayer is beginning to find a new place in this new image - if we can call it an image. (Sometimes I think that this is nothing really new, but rather an old image being reborn so to speak - the Perennial Philosophy)

But certain images of God are fast becoming out of date and even redundant, and it would seem that if that is the case then perhaps our concept of prayer should also change. Rightly it has been said that most prayers seem always to be asking for something - that is, from a personalised Being. This should not be looked down upon, but can have its own benefits. However it should also be recognised that there are other aspects of the prayer life, which are not even understood.

But let us first look at some basic concepts of prayer - again concepts that are not often considered. Dean Inge, one time Dean of St. Paul's in London wrote: 'When we say our prayers, we are sometimes only making petitions that something which we desire may be granted to us. Very often, he says 'this kind of prayer is all that we can achieve. But prayer itself is the elevation of the mind to God, and we cannot pray unless we believe that the mind is capable of being so elevated.' (Personal Religion and the life of Devotion p.15) It is as basic as that - but how many people these days, when they pray, look upon it like this? Not very many I should think. In another book Dean Inge writes: 'Praying is to religion what thinking is to philosophy. Prayer is religion in action'. And he writes something very important for those who would come to a better understanding of the actual nature of prayer. He says, 'If we knew how a man prays, and what he prays about, we should know how much religion he has and what kind of religion'. And what is not often understood about prayer is that there are two distinct aspects - first the accepted definition, that is 'a lifting up of the soul to God'. The other side or aspect is, a 'descent of the Spirit of God into the human soul'. As Dean Inge says, without both aspects we could not come into contact with God. And he adds: 'The Spirit prays in and with and for us. There could be no prayer' he writes, 'if God were not both (to use the technical words) immanent and transcendent.' (Our Present Discontents - p.141)

There are other deeper aspects of prayer that we will briefly touch upon to try and see how they are related to both meditation and contemplation. But first let us look at the main methods of prayer. These of course can vary, but there are four distinct methods.

Verbal Prayer

First we begin at the beginning so to speak - that is with vocal or verbal prayer. To the mystics, in a paradoxical way, this is both the beginning and the end of the devotional life - as Dean Inge said, 'Prayer is religion in action'. But usually verbal prayer is the starting point. This is the simplest aspect of prayer, in which words play a predominant part. It consists of sounds made either audibly and also inwardly. One of the great difficulties with this kind of prayer is that it can easily turn into empty repetitions. For example if we constantly repeat something to ourselves - something that we are familiar with. We first repeat it with meaning, but we soon find that it can easily turn into sounds that are jumbled up - we lose all coherency, and very often we have to consciously bring ourselves back to what we are saying again in order to understand it. This also often happens in the repetition of some mantras.

Thought Prayer

Thought prayer or mental prayer is more inward. It tends to be faster - almost instantaneous. Very often it starts with vocal prayer, but as one begins to get into the spirit of the words, the actual words gradually drop away and the prayer is like a wave of thought which passes over one. This tends to happen when words become tedious and slow, and ones devotions get deeper and more inward.

Heart Prayer

Heart prayer is an awakening of the devotional and aspiration aspect of our natures. It is a raising and uplifting of the emotions. (Note: Emotions when not directed tend to be outward and downward.) Sometimes it uses both verbal prayer and thought prayer as a starting point, but it then merges into a kind of raising of the heart and aspirations where all words and thoughts drop away. This is the way of the Bhakti Yoga. This kind of prayer is often difficult to hold.

Will Prayer

Will prayer is an instantaneous direction of the votive aspect of the mind. It sees the thing as being accomplished. In this kind of prayer there is almost a resignation that the Divine already knows what is best for one, and the prayer, 'Thy will be done' is uppermost in ones thoughts. It is a life consecrated to do the Divine Will.. At its highest point it is the personal will being united with the Divine Will - however at this point it ceases to be prayer as such, but crosses over into contemplation.

These then are the main methods of prayer - vocal or verbal prayer, the prayer of the mind, heart and the will. There are however various degrees of prayer, which we will now consider.

First - the prayer of Simplicity

The prayer of simplicity is related with both verbal prayer and mental prayer. Sometimes it can be a spontaneous verbal aspiration. However it is the simple act of putting together words that have the effect of leading one from the outer, to the inner life. Most prayers very rarely pass this point.

Second - the prayer of Recollection

The prayer of Recollection is linked with the prayer of the mind. This kind of meditative prayer is carried out at the level rational thought, however when all thoughts are at rest, then there is an inner peace and spiritual converse. An inner tranquility takes place and there may be moments of contemplation and spiritual insight.

Third - the prayer of Quiet

When we pass on from the prayer of Recollection, an inner stillness takes over and we enter what is often called the 'prayer of Quiet' - without any real effort being needed. It is an inner peace that 'passeth all understanding'. The mind becomes in-drawn so that it4 hardly known that it is active - all thought processes slows down and an inner state of repose is realized.

Fourth - the prayer of Union

The next stage, or degree, of prayer is that of Union. It is a state beyond all thought - a state of bare awareness. In reality it is no longer prayer as such but contemplation - sometimes called contemplative prayer - probably because its original starting point was prayer.

From the above aspects of prayer one can see how the one spiritual discipline can easily

merge into the other.

MEDITATION

And this leads us to some types of meditation. (We have already looked at some forms of meditation as practiced in the different Faiths.) Meditation, although distinct from prayer, can easily develop and emerge from some of the deeper aspects of prayer.

1. The Prayer of Meditation.

In the prayer of meditation certain elements are recognized: (a) quieting the emotions, (b) slowing down the thoughts (c) concentrating the mind i.e. through the repetition of some prayer or mantra. To begin there may be a reading of a religious or spiritual book, and then entering into a thoughtful and deliberate prayerful reflection. This is then followed by a mantra to concentrate the mind. In this way the thought process will automatically slow down.

2. Reflective Meditation

Reflective meditation, or reflective rational meditation, as it is sometimes known. This is similar to discursive meditation. It considers all the implications of the subject of meditation. For example it may be a meditation on things as they really are. For example, one such meditation may be on the idea of the 'self'. We look at what we think to be the 'self', the physical body, our feeling, emotions, the mental process, and so on. We examine this 'self' in detail. This can be quite a process. Some other subjects of this type of meditation might be (1) A meditation of motive - this may be a form of self-examination. (2) A meditation on Dispassion - not being disturbed by the passing changes of the world. (3) A meditation on the difference between 'knowledge' and 'faith' - we ask, what do I know? How do I know? And so on. (4) A meditation on the doctrines of faith - for example, the Christian Trinity - perhaps related to the doctrine of the Trinity found in Hinduism and Buddhism - or even on its own. All are aspects and types of reflective meditation.

3. Discursive Meditation

In discursive meditation we follow a line of thought, like that of reflective meditation, and we consider all the implications - we use both knowledge and imagination and we **form resolutions** which should result in a greater understanding. This may be seen to be a sub-division of reflective meditation because it takes it to its next logical state.

CONTEMPLATION

Contemplative Meditation

Contemplative meditation is sometimes referred to as 'contemplative prayer', 'mystical prayer' or just 'contemplation'. They are basically the same, however, when we go over the actual degrees of contemplation it will be seen that there is more to contemplation that is sometimes realized or understood.

F.C. Happold gives an outline just what contemplation is. He explains it in this way, and this can be quite helpful. "There are two ways of approaching the world and trying to penetrate to its nature and meaning. One way is to stand over against it, as if it were distinct from oneself, and interrogate and interpret by the aid of observation and reason. One remains outside it as the observer of something other than oneself. The other way is to try to transcend this subject-object relationship by 'merging' oneself in the world, and as it were, becoming part of it, i.e. simply 'contemplating' it, seeing it from inside instead

of from outside. Take a picture. One may look at it as something separate from oneself, concentration on its pattern, brushwork, colour combinations, and technique. Or one may sink oneself in it, 'contemplate' it, unconscious of its several parts, and let it have its effect on one. The same is true when listening to a piece of music. One may consider its pattern, the way it is built up, the way the different themes and instruments are combined. Or one may simply listen, not thinking or analyzing at all, so that 'you are the music while the music lasts'.

In contemplative meditation he says "we are doing something like this. We are endeavoring to raise the spiritual consciousness to a higher level, so that a capacity for 'mystical seeing' may be developed. We are endeavoring to transform the 'Psychical man', so that it may become a 'spiritual man'. We are endeavoring, too, to establish a deeper more real communion with God. And all this not in order that we may wallow in 'spiritual delights', but in order that the active life may be redeemed and lived in a new dimension in which one is no longer imprisoned in ones own activity, since every action is performed in relation to something higher than itself." (The Journey Inwards p.63-4)

We now come to a more detailed look at the various degrees of contemplation, some of which we have already touched upon. In meditation, as in prayer 'there are definite stages involved and an obvious crossover into contemplation, all of which entail the use of the mental faculties. The mind must be aware of what it is meditating upon. It extracts from things and reflects upon their spiritual significance. But in contemplation proper we pass on to a dimension of soul activity that transcends thinking as such. Contemplation often takes place when the mind feels that it has gone far enough and wishes to enter into a stillness and peace. But this cannot be learnt from lectures or books - and it certainly cannot be taught. One can only point the way to an ideal.

Thomas Merton (A Christian monk and spiritual writer) wrote that: "Contemplation is the highest expression of mans intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully alive, (and) fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being." Contemplation he says "is a kind of spiritual vision to which both reason and faith aspire, by their very nature, because without it they must always remain incomplete." He says it is "not vision because it sees "without seeing" and knows "without knowing". In "contemplation we know by "unknowing". Or, better, we know *beyond* all knowing or "unknowing". - Now as we can see from this description given by Thomas Merton, we are knee deep in the realm of mystical paradox - (it is, and at the same time, it is not.). But sometimes this is the only way in which such matters can be explained.

According to the mystical tradition of the West there are various stages of contemplation - trance, rapture and union. (These are the basic three).

- (1) **Trance** is more of a passive state. All the mental faculties come to a rest. (For someone to describe properly any of those three states is almost impossible - the best that one can do is explain it in mystical language.) Trance takes place when all thinking is dropped away and one is a state of inner spiritual rest and deep tranquility - a stillness of ones whole being.
- (2) **Rapture** takes place when the higher mind and intuition comes into play. It beholds more of the Universal aspects of truth. It sees in terms of 'wholenesses'. It stands at the highest point of the mind where the intuition simply gazes upon truth, goodness and beauty as universal Ideals. It is no longer thinking in terms of particulars (which belong to the discursive reason), but beholds Universal

Principles and Divine Realities.

- (3) **Union** - this is the ultimate and highest goal of contemplation. It is a state where the knower and the known become as ONE. In Greek terminology this is referred to as Nous (A Union with the Divine Mind). It is also sometimes understood as the Divine Ground or Divine Being.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can clearly see from the above that there is a definite crossover and intermingling of all levels of prayer, meditation and contemplation. Again we have only managed to touch upon the basic elements. And one is not sure if we have given it any justice. In reality it is something that has to be lived. We have to be and do in order to become.

From all this we come back to simple prayer again - where it all began - a realization of the true nature of prayer. As Dean Inge says, it is "the elevation of the mind to God, and we cannot pray unless we believe that the mind is capable of being so elevated." And it seems to come down to this basic premise - a personal belief that we can actually gain something from prayer, meditation and contemplation - that our minds *can* be so elevated. Prayer he says, is a lifting of the mind and heart up to God and a decent of the Spirit at the same time - a two way process. And from this 'two way process' one can perhaps see how both meditation and contemplation can take place - if we have a basic understanding of prayer in this way. However, as was pointed out, most people think of prayer as verbal or vocal prayer - petitions, entreaty, some form of request. A similar understanding can be said of both meditation and contemplation - thinking that meditation is just sitting down and closing ones eyes and drifting into a kind o dream world, and that contemplation as being just another word for meditation. There is of course a crossover between all three, but as we can see there is also a distinct difference, which is not always recognized.

GUIDED MEDITATION - BRINGING THE LIGHT DOWN

(In this guided meditation, I think it is wise that we continue with breathing slowly and using the phrase 'peace-be still', rather that introducing something more complicated.)

1. As usual we begin by breathing slowly - by paying attention to our breath.
2. As we breathe in we mentally say 'peace', and as we breathe out we say 'be still'. We breathe in 'peace, we breathe out 'be still'. Again, don't force it, just keep it gentle and easy.
3. As your breathing gets deeper, with each breath in we mentally say. 'Peace', 'peace', peace.' and as you breathe out we say 'be still', 'be still', 'be still'.
4. We keep breathing this way for a few minutes.

PAUSE

5. Now focus your attention just above your head - still breathing slowly and steadily. We visualize a ball of glowing white light. And with each inhalation we breathe the light down over the body.
Do this for a few more minutes.

PAUSE

6. Now go back to your breathing again - keep it steady and simple. We breathe in and say 'peace', we breathe out, 'be still'.

PAUSE

7. Now focus on your surroundings again - take a few deep breaths. Think of where we are. Take your time, and start becoming aware of your surroundings. Breathing deeply, and when you are ready we gradually focus on where we are and open our eyes. Do this in your own time.
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