

# Images as blocks on the spiritual path

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Images of God are such a hindrance on the spiritual path that I would like to mention a few more examples.

If we are brought up with ‘*God, the Father*’ and our experience of our own father was far from nourishing – we felt rejected, criticised, abused – this image will not give us the trust needed to let go and enter the silence. Not only will God seem someone to be feared and avoided, but also our self-image will be as one totally unworthy of God’s attention. Even calling and thinking of God as ‘*Mother*’ does not really deal with this problem – we are merely replacing one image with another. Other people may have had the same rejecting experience with their mother.

Jesus called God ‘*Father*’, because in Jewish culture and society the family is the centre of societal life and the father/son relationship is of foremost importance. By using that name his audience would know, how intimate and significant his relationship with God was to him.

If God is seen as a judge, he becomes someone to avoid rather than relate to, as so many of us carry such a burden of perceived guilt. “*Is God really unconditionally loving and forgiving?*” “*Will he not find me wanting?*” So why would we want to go into the silence

to be in His Presence? Why would we want to put ourselves in a position, where we could be judged and rejected?

The image of God as a judge is very common even now. Some of us still believe our good fortune is a reward from God for living a righteous existence and our misfortune is a punishment for breaking His commandments. This belief was so very common in Jesus' time *"that even his disciples were dumbfounded when Jesus proposed a radically different way of looking both at suffering and well-being. Good fortune, being comfortable and well-off might in fact, he said, be a curse in disguise."* (Laurence Freeman OSB *'Jesus, the Teacher Within'*)

Being brought up in a strict denominational religion, where different ways of prayer are frowned on, can be a real hindrance on the path to the Divine. We may well feel that in following the path of meditation we are disloyal to our parents. This either stops us in our tracks or we continue our own search but feel divided within ourselves.

Our spiritual growth is marked by and reflected in our changing images of God. But we all change at different rates. We must therefore be careful not to tread on the images of others. John Cassian relates the story in his *'Conferences'* of a desert monk in the 4th century, who was told to let go of his anthropomorphic image of God. He obeyed, but a little later we hear his heart-piercing cry of anguish: *"Woe is me, wretch that I am! They have taken my God from me, and I have no one to lay hold of, nor do I know whom I should adore or address!"*

Only by persevering with meditation we will experience for ourselves that the Divine Reality we meet in the silence of meditation is one of love and acceptance of who we are, as we are. Our wrong actions will at a stroke be dissolved by Divine forgiveness, as is illustrated by the parable of the Prodigal Son.

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