

The danger of self-fixation

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An excerpt from John Main, “A New Monasticism” in MONASTERY WITHOUT WALLS: The Spiritual Letters of John Main (London: Canterbury Press, 2007) pp. 25-26.

So often when we talk to God we are talking about ourselves—help me to do this, to be that. However altruistic the basic intention behind this may be, the very structure of the language keeps us as the centre of our own consciousness. This is also true for those who may have no religion frame of reference but whose spiritual practice is self-referential. Even if they use no words or hold any image of God and are not asking for favors, the danger of self-fixation is as great. It is this we must let go of in order to move deeper. There is no standing still on the journey, no drifting. If we become spiritually complacent, we fall back into our own centre of gravity. We are drawn back into the orbit of the self-reflecting ego. It is to avoid this collapse into ourselves and stay alert and awake that we meditate. In meditation, God the mystery is always at the centre. As we move into union with that centre, we come to know God by the divine light. The name of this movement is love and the experience of it is a progressive loss of self and self-consciousness. [. . .]

[O]ur time of prayer must be committed to the fullest openness that we are capable of— openness to the reality of presence, not to the “vain imaginings” of the the great illusion of independent permanence we call the ego. It is an illusion because the true self has no image. It is full, undifferentiated consciousness.

Human consciousness is limited and fractured by the false image, the shadow of the ego. It is made whole by the light of Christ in whom there is no darkness, no objectification of separateness of being that can cast a shadow.

After meditation: an excerpt from Mary Oliver, “Coming to God: First Days,” THIRST (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 23.

Lord, I will learn also to kneel down
into the world of the invisible,
 the inscrutable and the everlasting.
then I will move no more than the leaves of a tree
 on a day of no wind,
bathed in light,
like the wanderer who has come home at last
and kneels in peace, done with all unnecessary things;
every motion; even words.

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