

Entering the inner desert

wccm.org/weekly-teachings/entering-the-inner-desert

7 June 2024



Last week we talked about what may happen to us on our journey of meditation. We begin with enthusiasm, our commitment to the daily practice grows, but in time we inevitably meet with the ‘demon of acedia’, as the Desert Fathers and Mothers called this emotional state. We start feeling bored and restless; we feel as if we enter the inner desert. Thomas Merton, talking about this ‘desert’ experience, said, *“Only when we are able to ‘let go’ of everything within us, all desire to see, to know, to taste and to experience the consolation of God, only then are we truly able to experience His presence.”*

Therefore it requires a ‘letting go’, and in this way this ‘desert experience’ is a purifying one. It is a challenge to overcome our self-centeredness and to meditate without reward, without knowledge where the Spirit is leading us, to meditate even when assailed by these deep distractions. As long as we persevere and faithfully sit down to our practice regardless, we will eventually break through all resistance and will be brought purified and strengthened to true self-knowledge. In this way the desert is also our way to the Promised Land, for in the words of Evagrius, the Desert Father: *“No other demons follow close upon the heels of the demon of acedia, but only a state of deep peace and inexpressible joy arises out of this struggle”*. This ‘deep peace and inexpressible joy’ the Desert Fathers and Mothers called ‘apatheia’, a deep imperturbable calm, a truly healed soul. They knew that ‘apatheia’ or ‘purity of heart’ was the prerequisite for entering the

'Kingdom of God', being in the Presence of God: *"What the fathers sought most of all was their own true self in Christ. And in order to do this, they had to reject completely the false, formal self fabricated under social compulsion in the 'world'."*(Thomas Merton)

Our 'true self in Christ' shines therefore forth, when the flow of thoughts and feelings has been stilled, when the ego-masks and false images of self have dropped away and the emotions are purified. Then we know ourselves as 'children of God', made in the 'image and likeness' of God. This calm, this bliss, this peace and joy is at the same time perfect awareness, super wakefulness. Then we are 'fully alive'.

From there flows the final stage of 'agape', the highest experience of all, one of oneness with the universal, unconditional love of God. The knowable world of forms and all concepts of the mind are transcended. We intuitively know *"God is without quantity and without all outward form"* and we *"see with wonder the light of our own spirit, and to know that light as something beyond our spirit and yet the source of it"*. (John Main) We have transcended all division. We know our spirit to be one with the Spirit. We have entered the stream of love between the Creator and the created. We have come home.

"Man must first be restored to himself that, making in himself as it were a stepping-stone, he may rise thence and be borne up to God" (St Augustine)

[download printable version](#)

Image by [Martin Redlin](#) from [Pixabay](#).