

It is simple, but not easy



“Therefore I bid you put away anxious thoughts about food and drink to keep you alive, and clothes to cover your body. Surely life is more than food and the body more than clothes” (Matthew 6:25).

“We aim to be still in the present moment, which is the only moment of reality, of encounter with the God who is ‘I Am’. Yet within seconds we are thinking thoughts of yesterday, making plans for tomorrow or weaving daydreams and wish fulfillment in the realm of fantasy. *‘Set your mind on God’s kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well. So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself’ (Matthew 6:33).*

Jesus’ teaching on prayer is simple and pure, incisively wise and commonsensical. Yet it seems way beyond our capacity to practice it. Was he really speaking to ordinary humanity at all?

The discovery of our surface distractions is humbling. So, it helps to remember that it is a universal discovery, why else did Cassian recommend the mantra (he called it a ‘formula’) sixteen hundred years ago? Yet our own age has added to the problem of natural

distraction by the enormous mass of information and stimulus that we must swim through every day, trying to absorb and classify it all from the moment we turn on the radio in the morning to when we turn off the television at night.

At this discovery it is easy to be discouraged and turn away from meditation. *'It is not my kind of spirituality. I am not the discipline kind of person. Why should my prayer time be another time for work?'* Often this discouragement veils a recurrent feeling of failure and inadequacy, the weak side of our damaged and self-rejecting ego, *"I am no good at anything, even meditation"*.

What we need above all at this initial stage is an insight into the meaning of meditation and a thirst arising from a deeper level of consciousness from the one we seem stuck at. It is here right at the outset, therefore, that we encounter, although we may not yet recognize it as such, the prompting of grace. It comes from outside us in the form of teaching, tradition, spiritual friendship and inspiration. From within, it comes as the intuitive thirst for deeper experience. Christ, who as Spirit is no more within us than outside us seems to push from outside and pull from within.

It helps to understand clearly from the beginning what is the meaning and purpose of the mantra. It is not a magic wand that blanks the mind or a switch that turns on God, but a discipline, *'beginning in faith and ending in love'*, which brings us into the poverty of spirit. We do not say the mantra to fight off the distractions but to help us remove our attention from them. Simply discovering that we are, however poorly, free to place our attention elsewhere is the first great awakening. It is the beginning of the deepening of consciousness that allows us to leave the distractions on the surface, as waves on the surface of the ocean. Even at this earliest stage of the journey we are learning the profoundest truth, as we leave our religious as well as our ordinary thoughts behind: it is not our prayer but the prayer of Christ that concerns us.

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