

Thursday Lent, Week 2



I was once walking in the Arizona desert, enjoying the sense of freedom that the wilderness gives. On turning a corner on the path I faced a state sign that informed me officially that 'you are now entering the Arizona State Park.' The desert suddenly evaporated and I was left with a state park. Beautiful though it still was, something had been lost.

The real wilderness doesn't have official signs. What signs there are summon us deeper into the desert beyond all signs into an experience where the sign and what is signified become one. Meditation is the direct path to this.

Wilderness attracts and frightens us. It attracts because it promises reality stripped of its superfluous layers. It frightens because as each layer peels off we come closer to our selves and the spirit of God and it seems hard to distinguish between them. 'Am I going crazy? What's happening?' We fear getting lost in the wilderness of God - although we are drawn to it as our true home. But the true wilderness of the spirit is not always what it seems.

Is it easier to meditate in a peaceful place far from the noise and psychic bustle of cities? In many ways it is, of course. Away from the congestion and pollution we can better face our own fears and aggression. We can listen more wholeheartedly to the silence of God. But a city may at times be the better place to meditate because there we are faced with a starker choice of lifestyles. If we want to be serious about the practice then we have to allocate time and protect it and give up some of the more distracting elements of our social or individual routines. Without a shift in lifestyle the more permanent levels of transformation easily get blocked. In the end inner and outer are one.

But there is another reason why the wilderness of the city may be better than that of the desert or forest. An elder of the desert father was once asked what he thought of the story of another monk who had had moved away from everyone into complete solitude. Everyone praised him for his heroic spirituality. The elder reflected and after a long silence replied: but whose feet will he wash? Too much concentration on one's goal and progress in meditation

can lead to counter-productive momentum in which we collapse into self-fixation. The ultimate test is not our mindful minds or freedom from distraction but our love for others and the degree of compassionate pure attention we give them.

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