



LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

Aspects of Love 2

LOVING OURSELVES & OTHERS



Meditation teaches us that we can only love ourselves if we can accept ourselves. Self-acceptance leads to self-transcendence. We can also learn to love those close to us by withdrawing our positive projections or fantasies of them. We learn to love our enemies by withdrawing our negative projections of them.

These talks dwell on three aspects of love: love of self, love of others, love of God. Meditation is the regular discipline that gradually leads us to love ourselves, others and God. Fr Laurence, director of The World Community for Christian Meditation, relates the practice of meditation to love as the very meaning of our creation and our lives.

Transcript of talks at retreat in Montreal, Canada, 1996

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THE WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

MEDITATIO HOUSE
32 HAMILTON ROAD
LONDON W5 2EH
UNITED KINGDOM

www.wccm.org welcome@wccm.org



**The World Community for
Christian Meditation**
(Singapore)

To love others, like loving ourselves, is about letting the other be who they are. The only way to deal with the complexity of human relationships is the simplicity of love; in love where we do not judge, where we do not compete, but where we accept, revere, and learn compassion. In learning to love others, we release the inner joy of being that radiates outwards through us touching others through our relationships.



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*The first aspect of love is love of self.
To love ourselves, is to find a middle path
between self-denial and self-rejection on
the one hand, and self-indulgence and
narcissism on the other. Meditation is a
middle path. Where, through the power of
the Spirit, we learn to accept ourselves as
we are, without judgment, without
partiality. We come to know ourselves.
Then, as we know ourselves, we see beyond
ourselves; we see that our true centre is not
in ourselves, but in God.*

*Self-acceptance;
Self-knowledge;
Self-transcendence.*



that love covers a multitude of sins; why forgiveness is the most revolutionary and transforming power of which we are capable. And, it teaches us how love is the essential dynamic of every relationship, the most intimate and the most casual. And it is the very ordinariness of our meditation that reveals to us how universal is the way of love.

This is from the First Letter of John:

How great is the love that the Father has shown to us. We were called God's children and such we are; and the reason why the godless world does not recognise us is that it has not known him. Here and now, dear friends, we are God's children; what we shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that when it is disclosed, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope before him purifies himself, as Christ is pure.

My children, love must not be a matter of words or talk; it must be genuine and show itself in action.

This is his command: to love one another. (1 John 3:1-3;18;23)



man, you have given it to me. What you did to the least of my little ones, you have done it to me. (Matthew 10:42; 25:40)

So our love of self, that we learn through the stillness of meditation, leads us on directly and naturally to love of others. But then, as we learn to accept the relationships of our lives as the sacred grounds of our lives and the sacraments of divine life, as we learn to live relationships with others, we have to learn also the human skill, the human art, of withdrawing our projections from them, if we are to love them. To love others, like loving ourselves, is about letting the other be who they are.

The only way to cope with the complexity of human relationships, is to learn to love: to learn that love is the unifying force in every human relationship, whether it is relationship with those closest to us, those who have hurt us and may be unrepentant about the way they hurt us, or the way we relate to humanity at large – to the bum in the street or to the suffering we see on our television screens. It is the same love that relates us to all of those relationships. The only way to deal with the complexity of human relationships, which are so complex, is the simplicity of love; in love where we do not judge, where we do not compete, but where we accept, where we revere, and where we learn compassion. And so, in learning to love others, we release the inner joy of being, the joy of being that radiates outwards through us, through our relationships, touching others through our relationships. That is why communities and families and marriages don't exist only for the perfection of the people in those immediate relationships. They exist also to radiate outwards the love of the family, the love of the parents, the love of the members of the community, beyond themselves; radiating that joy, that simplicity of love outwards beyond themselves, to touch all those who come into contact with it.

That was Fr John's vision of community, of a community that was made possible – not made perfect, but made possible – by the commitment we make to the most profound relationship of our lives, which is our relationship with God. And it's why, in learning to love others, we come to a new glimpse, a new insight into the unity of creation, into the simplicity of life, when we see what it means to say

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Loving Ourselves

Our human experience of love develops with our stages of growth. We have to grow up. We have to become adult if we are to realise our capacity for love, if we are to be the person that we are called to be. This process of growth and development is a journey. Life is a journey by which we pass through stages, and meditation is a journey. It helps us to understand that there are stages of development. That may help us to be patient – to find and to go with the flow rather than try to impose our own order, our own desire for growth or our own desire for love, upon a situation that isn't yet ready for it. Understanding that life and our capacity for love unfold by stages teaches us patience, teaches us wisdom.

But sometimes, these stages are misunderstood. This is where the teaching of Fr John on meditation is so important to us as modern people. Most of us were taught that we have to love God first; then having loved God, we must then love other people. And really, that was as far as most of us ever went. Perhaps there was a vague mention of loving ourselves because Jesus says that – that you have to love your neighbour as yourself. So we were taught a little bit that we have to love ourselves, but that love of self was usually put last, and also it was usually expressed in negative terms.

Fr John reversed that order. He said the first step is to love ourselves. The second step is to love others. And only then can we really enter into the mystery of loving God, or even know what it means to love God.

This changing of the order of the stages of our growth in love is of great importance to our own understanding of meditation. It makes us understand why meditation, which is so simple, can be so difficult, why it is such a challenge.

The difficulty and the challenge is that we are learning, as our

first step, to love ourselves. And most of us, come to meditation with strong forces of self-hatred, self-distrust, self-rejection. Most of us, particularly in our religious upbringing, had been told that we must be very suspicious of ourselves when we were taught to examine our conscience, even as young children. When we were taught to go to confession, our first prejudice, the prejudice with which we were trained, was that we must first look for our faults because those are the aspects of ourselves that God is most aware of, and those are the aspects of ourselves which we must be frightened of because we will be punished for them. So we were taught, even as young children, to consider ourselves as essentially suspicious, dangerous, as sinful.

And this led, in many cases, to the development of a wholly negative spirituality, a spirituality in which the image of God bore very little relation to the God that we find in the teaching of Jesus, to a God who loves. In this negative spirituality, where we focus upon our sinfulness – our jealousies, our lusts, our pride, our anger, all these negative emotions or negative forces in us, our egotism – in a spirituality that focuses self-knowledge only upon our negative side, God can only be understood as a God who punishes or who condemns. That is why one of the most dramatic changes that meditation works in our life is a re-visioning of our understanding of God. It is why many people will say, after they have been meditating for some time: “You know, nothing happens during my meditation, I’m just plodding along day by day, but for the first time in my life I am able to understand what it means to say that God is love. I begin to understand what all this religious teaching and all of Christianity is really about. I’m just beginning to see the light through these years of darkness.”

A negative spirituality, of course, is counter-productive. It tells us that we are sinful, we have an inbuilt, innate tendency to sin, that it is our deepest identity, and we must resist it and overcome it; that we are full of ego and that we must destroy the ego. But a negative spirituality of that kind tends only to reinforce the ego, to push it deeper down, to reinforce it with complex dynamics, to reinforce it with its own fears, its own guilts, its own shame. Then, of course,

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How to Love Humanity

In learning to love those closest to us, we must withdraw our positive projections, our fantasies. In learning to love those who are our enemies, we must learn to withdraw our negative projections. And in learning to love everyone, we have to withdraw our abstractions.

We have to withdraw the statistical mind, which is often the way we treat the suffering of others. We do this on a global level when we talk about how many hundreds of thousands of AIDs people are going to die. We think about it in terms of huge statistics. We sometimes do it in terms of social work, in hospitals or somewhere, where we go through training – necessary perhaps, and useful training processes – but then come to treat the patient or the case as if they were just a textbook study. To love humanity means we have to be able to treat every member of humanity as a unique individual.

Here we come to the great difference between compassion and pity. Pity is where we may love someone who is suffering, but that love is still in touch with our own fear. When we see the suffering of another, for example, when we see somebody dying, we cannot help but fear our own death. And if we are controlled by that fear, even unconsciously, we pity the person who is dying. “Poor thing,” we say. Where our love meets the suffering of the other person and escapes this dynamic of fear, breaks through this dynamic of egocentric fear in ourselves, we no longer think of the other suffering person as a poor thing; we think of them as ourselves. They are not separate from us.

The meaning of compassion is that we recognise, that we mourn with those who mourn, we die with those who die, we suffer with those who suffer. This is the compassion of Christ, which has united all humanity in himself: When you gave a glass of water to a thirsty

to blame others for what has gone wrong in our own life. This is the beginning of persecutions and holocausts. This is the beginning of witch-hunts, the beginning of all kinds of personal or collective inhumanity. It's the pleasure. This is the terrible part of human nature, that we can take a pleasure in blaming others for our faults, projecting our own problems onto them, making them scapegoats. There is a perverse pleasure in that. It happens over and over again in history. It happens over and over again in our personal lives. It is the darker side of human nature. And again, it is the work of deep prayer that allows us to forgive. Why the only way is the way of forgiveness, why Jesus makes that the axis of his moral teaching (that's all he tells us to do: to love one another including, specifically, loving our enemies). If we can learn to do that, we learn to go beyond the ego, beyond our fear, beyond our self-hatred and beyond our guilt, by withdrawing the way we project these on to others.

We come to realise, through meditation, that no one can take away from us what is ours. Our own goodness, our own identity, is inalienable; it cannot be taken away. That is why we have to understand forgiveness as a process, a process that takes us deep into our own wounded humanity; forgiveness which can only be complete as we see it complete in the love of Jesus for his enemies. It can only be complete if we have come to find our true self. We can only truly forgive when we know ourselves.



wherever you have these guilt, shame and fears in the ego, you get rebellion. You get the ego involved in self-contradictory dynamics: conflicts and tensions within ourselves, perplexing us, making us feel that we don't understand ourselves, we don't know why we're acting in the way we do. We feel overwhelmed by negative feelings and controlled by negative impulses. We find ourselves fixed, so often, in patterns of life that seem to hold us and grip us with their negative forces, full of tricks of the mind, very much as people struggling with addiction face – all the tricks of the mind which will keep us trapped in addictions; all the excuses we make; all the plausible lies we tell ourselves in order to remain locked into an addictive pattern.

I think it's this negative spirituality with its counter-productive results that accounts, more than anything else, for the apparent rejection of institutional religion in the modern world, and why young people in particular, who've been trained in a very different way, simply cannot make sense of the Church, of that kind of institutional religion. I got a glimpse into that a few weeks ago when I was reading a copy of *Rolling Stone* magazine. It was the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Rolling Stone*, a collection of interviews conducted with rock singers over the last twenty-five years, starting with John Lennon and ending up with Madonna. And as I read it, I was amazed at what I was seeing. It made me understand why these are the heroes for the young, why these are the role models, They were not exemplary people by any means, they were not saints, but they were honest sinners. They were honest. And it made me understand why these were exactly the kind of people that Jesus hung out with and why it was so shocking to the Pharisees that he hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors and people who were fiddling their taxes and so on. These were the people whose sinfulness – their weakness, their pride and all the rest – is open. It is not denied, as we deny it in a negative spirituality.

This is something that we learn as we meditate: to face our dark side, to face our sinfulness, to face all these complex self-contradictory dynamics going on within us, and to face it without self-deception, without repression, without pious evasion. We face it

and accept responsibility for who we are in ourselves, and go beyond the divisions which a negative, self-rejecting spirituality imposes on us.

What heals the wounds of division is love. Love unites, unifies and heals the wound of the divided self. It overcomes the deep wounds of our alienation. It simplifies us. This is the real meaning of love of self, and why, as Fr John taught us, we have to begin with ourselves. In saying this, in a sense, he was saying nothing new. It is the very teaching of the Christian contemplative spiritual tradition, that our knowledge of God must begin with our knowledge of ourselves, that to know God we must know ourselves. As St Augustine said, we must first of all be restored to ourselves, so that we can then become a “stepping stone” and transcend ourselves and rise to God. What meditation teaches us is that we can only love ourselves if we can accept ourselves as we are; if we can recognise and see our wholeness, and put the dark side into the picture and accept that dark side as part of it.

But it all leads to a question: How *do* we love ourselves? I think in reaction to this long history of negative morality and self-rejecting spirituality, we have moved today, sometimes in a conflicting, self-contradictory way, to another extreme where we are told we've got to be good to ourselves: Look after yourself; be kind to yourself; give yourself a holiday; if you want to do something, do it. This is where love of self often becomes little more than self-indulgence, where to love ourselves is just to give ourselves a constant series of little treats.

It may be necessary and good for us to go to the other extreme a bit. Clearly there's a wisdom in that modern, popular psychology of being good to ourselves. But I think what the spiritual tradition, and the teaching of meditation, reminds us is that to love ourselves, is to find a middle path between self-denial and self-rejection on the one hand, and self-indulgence and narcissism on the other. Somewhere between self-rejection and self-indulgence, we find our true capacity to love ourselves.

Meditation, we know, is a path of moderation, a middle path. It is very difficult to stay on the narrow path of meditation. It is much

Loving Our Enemies

We have a problem in learning to love even those who are closest to us. So how on earth can we possibly love our enemies?

To love our enemies is a basic teaching of the gospel and it's one of the ways in which Jesus actually shows us the nature of God. When he tells us in St Matthew's Gospel that we must love our enemies, he relates that relationship to those who have hurt us directly to the nature of God: God who causes His sun to shine on the good and the bad alike; God who is indiscriminating in the way he causes his rain to fall on the good and the bad alike; God who is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked (Matthew 5:45). So this commandment to love our enemies is a way of teaching us something of the very nature of God.

Most of us have quite a different image of God. We don't think of God as being kind to the wicked; we think of God as punishing the wicked. But that is not what Jesus tells us of God. He tells us that we must become like God. We must love as God loves; we must be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect. He uses this idea of loving our enemies as the key to understanding how we do that.

In loving those closest to us, we have to withdraw our positive projections, the way we idealise people unrealistically. In learning to love our enemies, we have to learn to withdraw our negative projections, the ways in which we “dump” on to others all our own anger, all our own hurt or woundedness, our own faults. We all know, or probably have examples in our lives, where we realise (we usually see it more clearly in others than we do in ourselves) we see the way in which we often criticise others for the very faults that we ourselves have, but don't recognise or accept in ourselves.

Learning to forgive involves this complex and quite painful process of withdrawing our projections from others. Nothing is easier; it can give a kind of immediate satisfaction to us, to be able

ourselves is to be still. The way we learn to love one another is to withdraw our projections from them. And the projections we throw onto others are of two kinds. There are the positive projections: "This person is the most wonderful person I've ever met in the world." "This is the most wonderful community I've ever entered in my life; it's got all the answers for me." "This relationship is going to fulfil me and satisfy me; it answers every need I have and it will heal every wound I've ever had." Such idealistic projections have to be withdrawn. To love others, we cannot condemn them to playing out the roles of our idealised projections. Withdrawing those projections is a major step in maturity and it is the work, of course, that we perform in meditation.

As we enter into the solitude of our own uniqueness, we naturally withdraw those parts of ourselves that we project outwards through fantasy on to others. That's why our relationships change as we meditate day by day. But if we don't withdraw those projections, then the "love", in inverted commas, that we initially feel for those who become our idols or ideals, inevitably turns to hatred, to conflict. Sometimes you stay in relationship with those people or you continue to live with them anyway. We all know of relationships, marriages, where people have stayed together just fighting for thirty years, battling because they have disappointed each other in their initial expectations. We also know of many marriages, many relationships, many people in communities who have worked through those painful early stages of learning to love another. They have withdrawn those projections and have learned to allow the other person to be who they are with their faults and imperfections, and to accept that person as they are and to know them as they are, and then really to be able to revere them and to love them. It is only when we can learn to accept others as they are, in their imperfection, in their sinfulness, in their weakness, in their infidelity; it's only when we can learn to do that that we can really understand them as a sacrament of God, and our relationship with them as a means of realising our union with God.



easier, and there's a constant tendency, to drift off the path either toward self-rejection and self-denial on the one hand, or toward a very loose and lax self-indulgence on the other. We see this very clearly expressed today in the spiritual movements of our time. Some movements suggest total self-indulgence: anything goes; do what you like; if it feels good, do it. On the other hand, particularly in fundamentalism and some of the cults, there is tremendous rigidity, tremendous fear of pleasure, fear of harmony, and tremendous self-denial.

I think what we learn through meditation is to heal the wounds of those extremes through the power of the Spirit. And as the spirit is released, as the spiritual dimension is opened up, we learn the dynamic of loving ourselves. We learn to live with the law of that dynamic, and it is the dynamic, first of all, of accepting ourselves as we are, without judgment, without partiality. We learn to accept ourselves as we are, with our faults, with weaknesses, with all our tendencies. And then to know ourselves, to come to understand the meaning of what it is we are accepting. It isn't enough just to accept ourselves. To accept ourselves means we have to come to *know* ourselves and then only, as we know ourselves, can we see beyond ourselves, can we see that we are not limited to this particular egocentric person that we think we are, but that we are greater than that, That our true centre is not in ourselves, but in God.

Self-acceptance, self-knowledge and self-transcendence.



How to Love Ourselves

How do we love ourselves? We love ourselves by becoming still.

Stillness is a great discipline; it's the great discovery of meditation. Stillness is the dynamic of transcendence. The more still we are, the more we transcend our limitations. Now stillness does not mean stopping. It is not static. We can understand what stillness is when we see it as part of the whole process of growth in nature. There's a very important relationship between stillness and growth. Stillness is not incompatible with action. One of the things we begin to feel, as we meditate regularly, is that those times of meditation, morning and evening, open up a new centre of awareness, a new stillness of consciousness, of perception, deep within us, which is not affected by anything we do, however busy we may be, however rushed off our feet we may be, however involved in external activity we may be. If our meditation is regular, we'll find that there is a stillness in the midst of all our activity; in fact we begin to realise that the activity flows out of this stillness. It's stillness that we discover through meditation, the stillness in which we learn to love ourselves, to accept, to know and to transcend ourselves. This stillness is not in contradiction to action. In fact, it is the very reason for action; it is the energy of action.

Stillness means being effortless. When we are still, we are not making an effort. Not an effort of the will, which is why, in meditation, we are not willing ourselves to love God, or willing ourselves to love ourselves, or willing ourselves to love our neighbour. We are entering into this effortless and totally natural state. The ego, which is always trying to do things full of effort, finds stillness its greatest challenge, because in stillness we stop trying, we stop making these efforts. In stillness, we discover a new freedom, a freedom that lies beyond effort, beyond our egocentric wills: the effortless *being*, of being in harmony with the flow of life.

who said that she now has a curious role to play with her grandchildren, because they're coming to her bringing their fiancés to tea, and they sit and they talk, and they introduce the boy or the girl that they are hoping to marry. She said that she loves meeting them, but when they leave, as she clears up the tea things, she thinks to herself what a terrible gamble they are taking. If only they knew that six months or a year or eighteen months after they have married, they'll suddenly wake up one day, saying, "Who on earth is this person I'm spending my life with?" And that awakening can lead and often does lead to times of conflict in these close relationships of our life, where we see the differences between ourselves and what we felt so attracted to. We begin to enter into power struggles. Demands and expectations begin to form areas of conflict. Relationships often become very blaming relationships. We blame the other person or the community or the structures for disappointing us. And then when we blame, we usually try in some way or other to punish the other for disappointing us.

How do we love those closest to us then? I think the first way is that we must learn to see the relationship, the close, intimate relationship, as a kind of a ground on which we stand with the other. We stand together in that relationship. In other words, it isn't *my* relationship; it is *the* relationship that unites us. We stand as equal sharers in the mystery of that sacred ground. Very often, those close relationships in our lives, we didn't choose. Very often, we see them as gifts, people or communities that come into our lives as the sacred gifts of God, manifestation of the nature of God through human relationship. So we need to be able to see our relationships with those closest to us no longer from this egocentric point of view that I am at the centre of the relationship (this is my relationship, this is my wife, my husband, my friend, my brother or sister) but that the relationship enfolds us all. The first step, I think, in learning to love those closest to us is to realise that the relationship doesn't belong to anyone within it, but it is the ground in which we are growing beyond our own egos.

The way in which we learn to love others within that relationship is to withdraw our projections from them. The way we learn to love

How to Love Others

Love is our true nature and the true direction of our development. It is the direction in which we must always be growing. And all of that, we may accept – and it may sound inspiring when we reflect upon it – but it presents us with the problem, the challenge, of how it is actually lived. We may believe it, but how do we live it? To what degree do we regard the relationships of our lives, all the relationships of our lives, as the sacred ground of God; as the sacraments of God, and as the means we are given of realising our destiny in God?

Is it possible to love others, in other words? Is it really possible? And what does it mean? I think, if we are honest, we would say there's a lot of evidence to say that it is simply impossible to love one another, certainly on any large scale. For example, can we even love those who are closest to us? Just think about the people that we are actually living with; sharing life with, in family, in community, with our friends or spouses. We know that what often happens in those close relationships of life is that they begin with an experience of tremendous sympathy, recognition, empathy, romance, enthusiastic mutual acceptance – we fall in love. I'm not only talking about marriage. I'm talking about all close relationships, from friendships to people joining religious communities, and so on, as well as marriage. Whenever we enter into relationships that bring us close to another person or to other people, we usually begin with this initial experience of attraction. We feel, for example, in this first stage, we will never be lonely again; we have found the answer. We see this in religious communities and, of course, we see it in couples in their early stages of falling in love. And then, that first stage begins to wear off.

I remember recently talking with a woman and a grandmother,

This stillness is a kind of poverty, a letting go – a letting go of our effort, a letting go of our control; a letting go of the fears and desires that dominate our efforts. In this poverty, we discover how necessary it is for us to be poor in order to love.

We cannot love without poverty. We cannot love ourselves without entering into poverty of spirit. This is the first step: giving up, letting go, renouncing the patterns of control and effort and ego, in which most of us have become addictively enmeshed.

In poverty we accept impermanence. Impermanence terrifies us because it brings us face to face with our mortality, our death. But impermanence can also be seen simply in terms of this rhythm, this flow, the stillness connecting acts of motion, the stillness connecting the two breaths, the stillness connecting the two waves. There is impermanence, but there is also continuity.

As we learn to be poor in meditation, as we learn what the mantra has to teach us, we accept our mortality, we accept death and dying as part of our growth, and we learn to practise non-attachment, non-possessiveness, non-acquisitiveness in all our dealings with each other.

We fear poverty, but we learn somehow that it is poverty that leads us to the joy of the kingdom, the joy of letting go. In poverty, we possess only what is necessary, nothing more, nothing less. But in this poverty we come to face a fear, a deep and real fear in us. It's the kind of fear that you have when you are standing on the edge of a cliff. People often have this feeling of being on a precipice at certain stages in their journey of meditation, the fear of just being on the edge, of having to let go. There may be some kind of physiological, biological reason for it, perhaps, but this image of being on the edge, being on a precipice, is very common, very powerful; and the ego resists the final leap. The ego wants to draw back. The ego, which is this little island of consciousness, a dim light, wants to pretend that it is the whole light. And the ego, which of course has its necessary and important role to play, is not dissolved by drugs or by self-denial or by self-indulgence, or by efforts of the will. All of these tend only to reinforce it, to lock it more deeply into its fears and desires. The ego is dissolved only by love,

by opening itself to what lies beyond it, to the true light of which it is only a dim reflection.

In the stillness of meditation we confront the ego in the form of our distractedness, of our wandering mind, but it also makes us aware of how distracted we are at other times, not only when we sit to meditate, but how we can be distracted in everything we do, never content to do one thing at a time.

If poverty means that we possess only what is necessary, stillness means that we only do what is necessary. Stillness is only the necessary action or the necessary movement. That is why, when we meditate, we stop unnecessary thinking, It's the unnecessary thinking which dominates us, which is uncontrolled, which leads to our phobias, to our insomnia, to our fantasies to our paranoia.

We cannot learn to be still without learning to love ourselves. We learn through the stillness of meditation, to treat our own anger with compassion, our own irritability with compassion, our own judgementalism with compassion and tolerance and non-violence. We come dimly to understand, as we enter into the school of love, that this love of self leads to love of others and to love of God, and that this is *one* love. It is the same reality.

We need others, but solitude is necessary if we are to be able to live with others and to love others. Unless we can learn to be by ourselves and in ourselves, we cannot possibly learn to be in a truly loving relationship with others. And that solitude is the first step that we learn as we sit in stillness to meditate.

Solitude means learning to accept our uniqueness – a very terrifying concept, that we are utterly unique in the universe. We have never happened before and we will never be repeated. We are utterly unique. But we can only see that if we can see beyond our ego-bound vision. To see it is to experience an expansion of spirit, that itself can be quite frightening, because to expand means to let go of what we are clinging to. But this is the meaning of solitude.

To love ourselves means to love God. It means to experience a deep, inner gratitude for the mystery of our creation, for the mystery that we exist at all, for the mystery that God exists before we do; that we emerge out of the unfathomable mystery of God, of God's

relationship, that relationships are God's gift to us. The highest symbol of this is God. Everything that our tradition and our teaching tells us of God, symbolises the sacredness of human love, of human relationship.

God is a community of love – not an isolated being, but a community of persons. If God is love, God must be personal. Love cannot be impersonal; that's a contradiction in terms. God is for us not something way beyond our ability to experience or understand. The word 'God' is a symbol of wholeness and of the fulfilment of the human person in the divinised state. And God is a wonderful symbol for us of the sacredness of human relationships. The Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit – the relationships that form this mystery of God: love receiving and giving and transcending itself in ecstasy.

Creation is the ecstasy of God, the ecstasy of this communion of love; and human relationships are the essential means of realising this state of wholeness, which is God. Our human relationships are the sacraments, the affective signs. In traditional theological language, a sacrament is an affective sign. It's a sign of what is going on inside of you. It's the outward sign of an inward reality, but it's also called an effective sign. That means it actually brings about what is going on. It's not just a photograph, it's like those identity cards that get you in through the security. It's an affective sign, an affective image or symbol. That is why we cannot love God without loving each other, and we cannot love each other without loving God: "Whoever loves knows God." 1 John 4:7



limited world view, unless we can see the other as being other than us. That's the first step.

The second step is to see that the other is not separate from us. But we need to come to that first perception, and therefore we need the ego, which is the process of separation. We need that development of the ego, particularly in those first few years, to separate from the womb, to separate from the breast, to separate from the mother and the father and the family and friends and so on – to be able to separate, and come to stand on our own feet, and learn to be able to take the risk of being ourselves. The ego is a necessary, psychological process which enables that separation to take place. It's painful, it's traumatic, but it is necessary.

But the ego is also a barrier. It is the mechanism that allows this first stage of separation to take place, but it usually becomes a barrier because it locks us into a view of ourselves as permanently separate. As we're there, floating in the amniotic fluid of the womb, we are in a state of undifferentiated union, communion, with the whole universe; there is no separation between me and everything that is. But in order to become fully alive, we have to experience a rupture, a break, a separation from that sense of wholeness, that sense of unconscious communion. We have to experience a break in communion if we are to come to fully conscious communion. And this is a pattern that we may well learn to recognise throughout our life, the dying and the rising involved in all relationships.

But because the ego naturally does not like the pain involved in this, the ego doesn't really see much beyond pleasure and pain. It doesn't see any ultimate meaning in suffering. The ego eventually comes to recognise a pattern involved in this process of growth and it resists it; and therefore, we become stuck, fixated, locked into an ego level of development. The ego then becomes a barrier that we have to learn to transcend, to leave behind. We cannot follow the Master who calls us, unless we leave self behind. So the ego is like a boat that takes us across a river to the other shore, but it then has to be left behind.

The more conscious we become of this process, the more conscious we become that life itself is relationship; that life is about

love, that somehow, we are born out of the love of God.

To love ourselves means to live a life of this deep gratitude for being, and it gives sense to the idea of praising God. I don't think we can praise God unless we have learnt to love ourselves. To hate ourselves, on the other hand, is to hate God. Whatever pious image we may have of God, if we are not capable of loving ourselves, we really hate God; and we will express it usually by the way we treat each other. The reality that we face as we learn to love ourselves, the reality that we face in stillness, can be hard, but seeing it heals us.

If we can learn to see reality, it heals us. Just the seeing of it, just the living with it is healing. It brings us to a new kind of spontaneity, a freshness of life, a directness of experience, the spontaneity of a child, a spontaneity we must recover in order to enter the kingdom. It is the spontaneity of true morality, of doing the right thing naturally, not of living our lives by rule books, but by living our lives by what Fr John said is the only morality – the morality of love.

That experience of love of self gives us a renewed capacity to live our lives with less effort. Life becomes less of a struggle, less of a battle, less of an effort to live, and it opens up for us what we have all glimpsed, in some way and at some time, through love, that our essential nature is joyful; deep down, we are joyful beings. If we can learn to savour the gifts of life, if we can learn to see what life truly is, the goodness that it brings us, that savouring of the gifts of life enables us to accept its tribulations, its difficulties, its problems and suffering. This is what we learn gently, slowly day by day, as we meditate.

It brings us to understand the wonder of the ordinary. We become less addicted to seeking extraordinary types of stimulation, excitement, amusement or distraction. We begin to find, in the very ordinary things of daily life, that this background radiation of love, the all-present power of God, is everywhere and at all times.

But it can be hard work. There's a nice story about a disciple of the Buddha who was a very dull disciple, not very bright, who tried hard sometimes, but could never really understand anything that the Buddha was trying to teach him about the true nature of reality.

The Buddha got rather exasperated with this disciple, and one day he gave him a task. He gave the disciple a very heavy bag of barley and he said, "Take this. Run up this hill." It was a very tall, steep hill, and he said, "Run up this hill with this bag of barley."

The disciple, who was dull but very obedient and wanted to get enlightened, took the bag of barley on his shoulders and he ran up this steep mountainside and didn't stop, as he had been told to do. He didn't stop, and arrived at the top of the mountain in utter exhaustion, totally exhausted. He dropped the bag of barley and, in that moment of total letting go, he was enlightened. His mind was opened. He came back and the Buddha saw from a distance that he was enlightened.

So it's a hard work, this learning to be still, this learning to love ourselves. It's a hard work, but it's a work we do in obedience, not out of our own will. It's in obedience to our Master, the Lord Jesus. It's in obedience to the deepest call of our being, which is the call to be ourselves.



3

Loving Others

This is from the Gospel of John:

I give you a new commandment: Love one another; as I have loved you so you are to love one another. If there is this love among you, then all will know that you are my disciples. John 13:34-5

The first aspect of love is love of self – coming to a true self-acceptance, a true self-knowledge and then therefore being able to transcend ourselves. We can talk about this, and theologise and psychologise about it, but we need to know how to do it. I think the great gift of meditation is that it shows us, in very real personal experience, that to learn to love ourselves we have only to learn to be still, to come to stillness. As we face this mystery of love, we come to the understanding that love of self is the necessary condition enabling us to obey that commandment of Jesus: to love others; to love one another.

We cannot love others until we have laid this foundation of being able to love ourselves. Or to put it another way, because it isn't just black and white like that, the degree to which we can love ourselves is the degree to which we can love others. It's very challenging because some psychologists tell us that the ego has most of its defence mechanisms in place by the age of three. By that age, we don't have much control over what we do or what we're like. But we have time and we have to use the time we have to the best possible advantage, and this little mechanism of the ego is necessary for this. It's necessary for the first and second stages of learning to love. We need the ego to love ourselves; we need the ego to love others. We particularly need it to love others, because we need to be able to see the other as "other". We can't make that leap out of our own