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## Aspects of Love 3

### LOVING GOD



*Through meditation, we learn to let go of all the images of God which have formed in us over the years, and we recover the capacity to experience God fully. We learn to love God simply by allowing ourselves to be loved. In meditation, we experience ourselves loved, and we are thus empowered to love ourselves, love others, and love God.*

**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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We love because God loved us first.

(1 John 4:19)

*There's nothing more obvious than that God must have loved us first, but it's the obvious that we always forget. In meditation we remember that God loved us first, and by opening ourselves to that truth, we experience ourselves loved; we accept ourselves as loved; we allow ourselves to be loved. And it is as a direct result of that that we are empowered to love ourselves, and love others, and love God.*

## CONTENTS

- |    |                 |   |
|----|-----------------|---|
| 1. | Loving God      | 5 |
| 2. | How to Love God | 9 |



*There is often a big gap between the God in our minds, and the God in our hearts. Meditation teaches us that we must let go of the God of our minds, in order to love God. We must move beyond the image that may have formed itself in our minds in order to find the reality. We cannot be united without this experience of renunciation,*

God is love, and whoever dwells in love is dwelling in God and God in him. This is for us the perfection of love: to have confidence on the Day of Judgment. And this we can have because, even in this world, we are as he is.

There is no room for fear in love. Perfect love banishes fear, for fear brings with it the pains of judgment, and anyone who is afraid has not attained to love in its perfection. We love because he loved us first. (1 John 4:16-19)



reality. We do this continually, which is why in our prayer we need to go deeper than the mind, to that level of our being – the heart, the spirit – where there is no *thing* outside of us; where we understand that we are in relationship, in communion, in the dance of being, with everything that is, in God. And this is what each of us is called to, each of us is capable of. That’s why in our meditation, we surrender God. We surrender all ideas or images of God as being an object that can be seen, or a thing that can be thought, some *thing* outside of ourselves. God has never been seen, but dwells *in* us if we love one another. That is the whole structure of Christian life. God cannot be seen but dwells *in* us, if we love one another. Love is then “brought to perfection”, St John says.

These aspects of love we’ve been reflecting on show us that love is a school. We are learning to love by loving. Meditation is the principal lesson by which we are learning. We learn from meditation that love is the only thing on which we will be evaluated at the end of our life, as people do when they know that they are dying. The values by which they judge themselves are the values of love, values of their relationships. The only thing that people really want to do before they die is, as far as possible, to put their relationships in good order, to make sure that they take that final step of transcendence with as much free-flowing energy of love in them as is humanly possible for them.

In the light of this experience of meditation, we are able to see the balance of love in our life; this great balancing power of love that creates us, that accompanies us throughout our life; that heals – sometimes painfully – that heals and teaches us; the love that is with us, that accompanies us on the journey. Not the love that we are trying to gain, but the love that is constantly with us. Our eyes are opened, through meditation, to see how much this power of love is present in the midst of all our imbalance, all our own waywardness, all our own distractedness. Even in the distractedness of our meditation, we are able to understand, to perceive, to feel more and more deeply, the presence of peace. And what it teaches us also, as it teaches us to love ourselves, to love others and to love God, is that all relationships are really aspects of one relationship.

## Loving God

I’d like to turn to the third aspect of love, which is the love of God. There is a very close relationship between the way we imagine or what we think about God, and the way we experience God. Part of the problem we face when we come to meditation is that there is often a big gap between what we think about God, the God in our minds, and what we actually experience of God, the God in our hearts; between the God beyond images, and the God we have put into an image.

This gap between image and experience, or thought and experience is one of the wounds, one of the divisions within ourselves that is healed by meditation. It’s a wound or division that usually, for most of us, begins in childhood.

Most of us can probably remember an experience of God in our early childhood, a direct and complete experience. It may be an experience of overwhelming love, an experience of uncontainable joy or an experience, very often for children, of profound oneness with everything around them; perhaps in nature, just looking at a tree; a feeling of being swept up into the unity of creation. A child can have that experience very profoundly and totally, but a child has no concept to be able to label that experience, to describe it. And what happens of course is that the images, the concepts of God with which the child is shaped and formed in its religious development often bear no relationship to the experience that it has had; and very often, even if he talks about that experience or shares it, it isn’t related to God, to the real presence of God.

Much more often, our image of God is related not to those experiences of love, of joy, or of union, but it’s related to experiences of authority and punishment. A young child is taught to think of God as a sort of super parent. The very word we use about

God of course, Father, carries with it, in most children's upbringing, an image of a person in the family who does the correction, who does the discipline. The idea of God as Father carries with it, therefore, this sense of control, this sense of dominance. And where there is punishment or this kind of relationship to authority, there is usually fear. We fear being punished; we fear being sent to hell.

So there is, for most of us, a profound disharmony between what we think of God, the powerful image of God that operates in our minds, and the actual experience of God which we may have had as children, which we may even have now. What we learn in meditation is to let go of all the images of God which have formed in us over the years. And in letting go of all the images, all the imagining, all the concepts of God that have formed in us, we recover the child's capacity to experience God fully, the child whose experience is not controlled by its concepts. That is why Jesus says that in order to enter the kingdom, which is the direct experience of God, we must become like a little child.

Through learning that, we learn that the only image of God which is adequate is ourselves. We are the image of God, and this image of God is made magnificently visible in Jesus, Jesus who reflects to us who we truly are. He is the mirror, as it were, of our true self, the image of the invisible God as St Paul describes him.

Meditation is constantly teaching us that we must let go of God, the God of our minds, the God of our concepts in order to love God. This is a lesson we learn through all human relationships. To love, we must let go: we must move beyond the image of the other person that may have formed itself in our minds in order to find the reality. And a relationship can only be deep and enduring if we are moving beyond the image to the reality – if we are letting go of the person we love. We cannot be united without this experience of renunciation,

And we can only know God by love. This is the great teaching of the whole Christian tradition. God cannot be contained in any thought, or in any mental or legal system, or in any place, in any ritual, in any external form. But God can be known by love and, therefore, we must learn *how* to love God.

I remember some time ago, being with a woman who was dying.

what St John means when he says that God is greater than our conscience, a very liberating idea which we can only even begin to understand from our own experience of God. That God is greater than our conscience means that God is deeper than our own self-projection, deeper than our guilt, deeper than our fear of punishment; God, as St John says, knows all.

And we learn, through this combination of our own experience and the teaching, the wisdom of the tradition of the enlightened minds of the past. We learn that the only morality is the morality of love; that forgiveness and compassion are not signs of weakness or compromise or condescension, but forgiveness and compassion are the very structure of reality. This is the God who is equally loving to good and bad alike.

“Love is from God,” St John says. “Everyone who loves is a child of God.”

This experience of loving God is rooted in our capacity to be loved. And it's the great quality of a child that a child wants to be loved. It's the most natural thing; perhaps the only thing a child wants with its whole being is to be loved. It is that child-like capacity to be loved that we recover through meditation, our deepest and truest identity as a child of God. And it is this self-knowledge of ourselves as a child of God – wanting to be loved, and accepting the poverty, the vulnerability of needing to be loved – it's that which heals us. It's that self-knowledge, that vision of reality that heals us and heals the whole person; and the whole person includes the psychological reality that we are as a child of our parents, as a husband or wife, or friend, or brother or sister, or whatever. This psychological reality that we spend most of our time thinking about, struggling with, is a real part of us, but it is not the whole person. Here's the basic difference between the path of the spirit and the path of psychology. Our deepest identity is our identity as a child of God, and it is by discovering that and knowing that, that we release cosmic powers of healing and renewal.

St John says that God has never been seen. In other words, God can never be an object outside of ourselves. It is the mind that is always creating objects; the mind is always creating an external

You don't even have to try to love others. It's impossible to try, to force yourself to love someone, to force yourself to love yourself. It isn't an act of the will. We are impelled by the very nature of the experience of being loved to become loving. It reveals to us our true nature and our true potential.

But of course, we must not limit this experience of God's love for us just to the emotions, just to what we feel; or even to the mind, our ideas of God. It is deeper than both, this experience of the love of God flooding the heart. It is deeper than the mind and deeper than the emotions. It opens us up to the fundamental relationship of our being, the deepest identity we have. And it's in this relationship with God that all our other relationships, including even our relationship with ourselves, are rooted. What can be deeper than our relationship with ourselves? What is deeper is our relationship with God, the source of our being. Of course, this experience of being loved by God floods the mind and floods the emotions, and even floods the body. It transfigures every aspect of our being – body and mind, all the levels of the mind. But it is deeper than all of that. It is precisely because it can touch every part of our being, including our body, that it is deeper than them all.

It can be seen by the mind to some degree, and it can be felt in the emotions, and the emotions are part of our bodies. When we become whole, the more whole we become, the more integrated we become, the more we realise that this love of God is not only the background radiation of the universe; it is what we as a whole person are bathed in.

Here we discover one of the great fruits of meditation, in that this experience of God, silently and through stillness, and unself-consciously, develops and flowers in us day by day through our journey of meditation. This experience of God sends us back to the words and the images of scripture, not only our own scripture but indeed all scriptures. It changes our idea of God as it changes our idea of ourselves. I think we notice phrases, words, images in scripture that we didn't even notice before. We notice that Jesus, for example, calls God the One who truly is; we notice that St Paul calls God the Source, the Goal and the Guide. We begin to understand

She was tormented by the fear that she did not love God. She was a good woman who had lived a good life, but she was facing this tremendous anguish on her deathbed, and it was only very slowly and painfully that she came to understand that the very desire to love God is itself the love of God.

To want to love is to love, but the full flowering of love takes time. The full flowering of love involves an exchange of identity, a laying down of our life and a discovery of the other, and of ourselves in the other. We find ourselves no longer in the isolated state of our ego consciousness, but we find ourselves now in relationship, existing with the other, with others. The full flowering of love demands reciprocity, a mutual sharing, a giving and receiving.

When we use the word 'love', we always have to remember that it means two things, united in the same act. It means both loving and being loved. It is not fully love until the loving and the being loved have been balanced. Love is only fulfilled when the passive and the active dimensions or elements are balanced; and the receptive part of ourselves, the interior part of ourselves or the feminine part of ourselves, is balanced by the giving, the outward going or the male part of ourselves.

And God is the balance of love. The image of the Trinity is the most profound symbol of the Christian life. It shows us the dynamic balance of love, the giving of love, the receiving of love, and the ecstasy of love in the Spirit. We see it expressed perfectly in the language of Jesus, in St John's Gospel, as he describes his relationship with the Father through his human relationship with his Father. He does not exclude from that human relationship with his Father all his human relationships with his family, his friends, his disciples, and indeed all humanity.

Learning to love ourselves, which is the first step in our entry into this balance of love, requires simply that we learn to be still, that we learn to accept ourselves, to know ourselves and to allow ourselves to be led beyond ourselves through stillness.

Learning to love others means, in that stillness, we allow ourselves to learn to accept others and see others for what they really are, not putting them into the moulds of our own emotions or our

own desires or our own fears, not projecting our own feelings or images onto them, but allowing ourselves to see them and relate to them as they are in themselves. Therefore to be able to see our relationships as something that we share with others, as the sacrament of God's love bringing us, each of us and all of us, to wholeness, to the wholeness that allows us to share in the very being of God as St Peter says (2 Pet.1:4).

It is love that divinises us. And we learn to love – to love ourselves, to love others – we learn to love by entering into the mystery of relationship. So learning to love ourselves and learning to love others going hand in hand teaches us how to love God. It teaches us who God is, because it is only by loving that we discover who God is. “Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving know nothing of God.” (1 Jn4:8) However many wonderful ideas they may have about God, they know nothing of God if they are unloving, for “God is love”. And I think meditation constantly asks us how we still see God; this deepest belief and deepest feeling of our life, that shapes everything we do and everything we are, what kind of state that is in.

We have learned that they were told:

*Love your neighbour, hate your enemy; but what I tell you is this: Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. Only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who makes his sun rise on good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the honest and the dishonest. If you love only those who love you, what reward can you expect? Surely the tax gatherers do as much as that. And if you greet only your brothers or your sisters, what is so extraordinary about that? Even the heathens do as much. There must be no limit to your goodness as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds. (Matt.5:43-8)*

That is a wonderful description of wholeness. It's the wholeness that we all seek: the balance, the integration, the reconciliation of all things in our lives in love.



## *How to Love God*

If we learn to love ourselves by being still, and we learn to love others by withdrawing the way we project our emotions on to them, we learn to love God simply by being loved, by allowing ourselves to be loved. Our love of God originates in God's love for us.

*The love I speak of is not our love for God, [St John says] but the love he showed us in sending his Son as the remedy for the defilement of our sins. We love because God loved us first. (1 John 4:10,19)*

There's nothing more obvious than that God must have loved us first; God has created us out of his love for us. Nothing is more obvious, but it's the obvious that we always forget. What we learn in meditation is to remember that; to remember that God loved us first, and by opening ourselves to that truth, by accepting that truth, we experience the love of God flooding our inmost heart through the Holy Spirit he has given us. We experience ourselves loved; we accept ourselves as loved; we allow ourselves to be loved. That is what we are doing in meditation. And it is as a direct result of that, that we are empowered to love ourselves, and love others, and love God.

The great resistance to that is the ego. The ego wants to love God first, and of course the ego is constantly trying to put itself first. But as we learn to move beyond that egocentricity that tries to make us love God before God loves us, or even perhaps trying to love God so that he will love us – all the complex ways in which the ego tries to manipulate and control even God or through its image of God – as we learn to recentre ourselves in the true centre of reality, the reality that God loves us first, then that experience of being loved, which is the whole meaning of redemption, impels a response in us.