



Health & Wholeness

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Health is an experience of wholeness that incorporates even what seems like its opposite – sickness, suffering and death.

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CONTENTS

1. Health as our Capacity for Wholeness	5
2. The Ill-health of Distractedness	10
3. What Wholeness Means	14
4. Attention and Healing	17
5. Meditation and Relationship	21
6. Spiritual Knowledge	25

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*Wholeness, is our capacity
to experience health as
transcending all limitations
while accepting them.
Paradoxically, it is in
accepting the limitations,
that we can transcend them.*

1

Health as our Capacity for Wholeness

What do we mean by health? The World Health Organisation came up with a couple of definitions of health: 'The level of functional or metabolic efficiency of a living organism, free from illness, injury or pain' – a rather idealised and maybe even rather mechanised view of health, taking a sort of mechanical model to describe the human person. Another definition: 'A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' – again, a rather idealised idea of health, that there will be complete physical, mental and social well-being.

These represent rather medicalised or idealised views of what health means. It doesn't bear much relationship to our own experience of health. We are rarely as metabolically efficient as in the first definition. And if we are, as soon as we realise that we are in this state of metabolic efficiency, we begin to wonder how long it will last. So, very quickly, we become subject to fear or anxiety or insecurity about this efficiency that we call health.

What about aging? More and more people are spending more and more fortunes on denying or resisting or trying to reverse the aging process. So is that a medical condition or merely a technological problem that we will have to solve, maybe not just through creams and gels or injections but also maybe through organ replacements and technical miracles?

What about death? The awareness and the fear of death is never far from the surface; we repress the fear of death. Is death a medical condition? Do we approach death just in terms of clinical procedures, which ultimately fail, because death is a failure in the medicalised view of health, the purpose of which is at least to keep you alive?

St Benedict has another approach to it. St Benedict says always remember that you are going to die: 'Keep death constantly before

your eyes.' Now, he doesn't mean go around thinking about death all the time, but don't repress it. Benedict is not being morbid. He is expressing a universal spiritual practice, which you find in Buddhism and elsewhere, of being *memento mori*, being aware, being mindful of the fact that you are mortal. And the consequence of that is that you are free. All of that energy that goes into the repression of the fear of death is set free.

Why should the awareness and the acceptance of death bring us to a fuller sense of wholeness? I think because it is part of the whole picture, and it needs to be integrated. We need to have a certain conscious space that is aware of our mortality and even aware of the complete unpredictability, the randomness of our mortality. We don't know at any moment when we might die. So there should be a certain space in our available consciousness in which we welcome and accept this element of our mortality, and that makes us more whole, more integral.

The awareness and the acceptance of death, and the things that we associate with it, like suffering and loss, are not easy things to face; but if we do the evidence is, from a great deal of research done with those who are dying, quite surprising. The evidence is that those who are dying – who have their basic physical needs cared for, their pain taken care of; and their psychological needs are being met, maybe tying up the loose ends of their lives, or reconciling with their relatives whom they haven't spoken to, or saying sorry or whatever – if this natural physical and psychological work is being done, then the people who are dying who have now accepted that they are dying will say, 'I've never been happier'. It is quite amazing.

So health, we might say then, is better understood positively as an experience of wholeness that incorporates even what seems like its opposite – sickness, suffering and death. These would normally be said to be unhealthy or opposed to health, but actually acknowledging and accepting them – it doesn't mean you go looking for them but accepting them when they are there – seems to be an essential part of the healing process and leads us to a greater wholeness and a greater health.

Surely death and aging are experiences where we are given a

unique and new approach to meaning. And if we deny the reality or the nature of death or of aging or suffering, then we are denying ourselves the very lifeblood of the human journey, which is meaning. It is growing in understanding and in experiential understanding of the meaning of our existence. These are major sources of meaning for human beings.

Sport give us another insight into what we mean by health and wholeness. Like the ancient Greeks, we admire the human body at its most beautiful, fast, agile, strong and athletic. Today still, look at the huge amount of coverage sport gets; the heroes, the gods that we make of our successful athletes. Sportsmen and sportswomen, who reach physical excellence and had the control of mind also in a discipline to be able to use that physical excellence to perform at a peak level, are as close as we come to an idea of the gods.

Recently, we've been educated to look at a less idealised form of sports divinities in the Paralympics. Now we watch men and women in wheelchairs, who with artificial limbs perform extraordinary feats. They're not going as fast or jumping as high as in the regular Olympics, but we bring a different kind of admiration. There's a certain level of physical admiration of course, but also even more admiration of the character and the determination and the spirit of the people who had dealt with their disabilities so incredibly courageously, acknowledging and accepting in themselves what would make most of us despair or withdraw from life. Looking at the person who is acknowledging and accepting and transcending or integrating the very things that, for most of us, would represent failure or a cause for despair, the stories of those athletes just inspire and elevate us.

So perhaps, we understand from that example how health is not just the absence of problems, pains or disabilities, but health is our capacity for wholeness, in which everything including illness or disability can and must be integrated, including the very things that we find and fear most undesirable – sickness, suffering and failure.

That helps us to understand why meditation is a healthy practice, why it contributes to health at every level of our humanity. We know from the benefits that meditation brings and some research that

has been done – it is very variable research, but from the research being done into the physical benefits of meditation – that it is good for you physically. And that can be measured. We also know that it has very strong impact upon our psychological health and well-being. And as soon as we begin to be sensitive to the spiritual dimension, we can begin to understand how meditation promotes, spiritual health as well.

You may be attracted to meditation because you want to de-stress. You know that stress is a big problem in your life – you can't sleep properly at night, it is affecting your relationships, so meditation, it seems now with all this research, will help you reduce your stress. Immediately, you can measure this with your blood pressure, even your cholesterol, and your sleep patterns. Psychologically, you know that the benefits of meditation will be felt in dealing with depression or anxiety attacks and other forms of stress.

These benefits of meditation are the ones you can measure – your blood pressure, your cholesterol, frequency of your panic attacks, even to some degree your depression. What strikes me though, interestingly, is that the medical practitioners that we've been working with recently are not particularly impressed by all this medical research. They are aware of it, they know that meditation is good for you, but they are approaching it actually from a much more holistic perspective.

We don't see the whole effect of meditation if we look just at a part of ourselves, but the major effect of meditation is, of course, a healing of this very way of seeing ourselves as fragmented, measurable bits. So it is the meditation itself that changes the way we see ourselves. We call it self-knowledge.

Meditation changes the way we see ourselves; that's, perhaps the biggest effect it has. And it serves to heal the fragmented self; it reintegrates and it leads to a growing sense of wholeness. That is why meditation is very relevant to every aspect of our idea of health – physical, psychological and spiritual. Complementing our understanding of the benefits of meditation, we find also the fruits of meditation, the spiritual fruits of meditation. St Paul calls the harvest of the spirit or the fruits of the Spirit 'love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control' (Gal 5:22-23).

How can you measure love or joy or peace or patience or kindness? Nevertheless, you can experience them. And you know that you are changing in this respect and that these qualities, which with a deeper understanding you can recognise, are the qualities of the life of the Spirit flourishing in you. And even if you don't know at first, the people you live with will know.

We've heard the wonderful words from the Gospel of John giving Jesus these words:

God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved, so that everyone who believes may not be lost but may have eternal life. Jn 3:17-18

We've heard those words no doubt many times, and I think that for the vast majority of the population they are rather over-familiar or too churchy or lacking in meaning. But the meditator is able to listen to those words from a different perspective, from a different experience, and see meaning in them. If we are experiencing life from our whole self, we have this health growing within us, then I think these words can become amazingly life-giving words.

There is a connection between the idea of health and salvation – *salve* which is a healing, like an ointment. So there is a connection here in the meaning of the words that becomes clearer to us when we listen to them from the experience of our own healing, of our own discovery of what health means, and of our own emerging wholeness.

Meditation helps us to see life as a journey to wholeness or holiness, and holiness simply means sharing in the life of the One who *is* holy, the One who is one, the One who is whole. ■

2

The Ill-health of Distractedness

Health is our capacity for wholeness in which everything, including illness or disability, suffering and failure, can and must be integrated. Our experience of meditation, from day one, teaches us this meaning of health as our capacity for wholeness.

You may start off as an idealistic meditator. You may have an image of yourself as a kind of athletic meditator – you're going to get a gold medal for your meditation; you're going to be on the front page of the newspapers; your spiritual body's going to be absolutely perfect. Then very quickly of course that image is shattered by the discovery of what you would first of all label as failure. The mantra is confronting you from the first moment with your chronic distractedness, with your unbalanced mind. You didn't even realise perhaps that your mind was so distracted and so unbalanced.

There is a failure of the ideal. It's like that ideal image of health; it breaks down as soon as you begin to look at it in terms of real experience. This ideal of meditation that you may have may be encouraged by the fact that the practice is very simple. That breaks down very quickly because you simply realise that you are not doing it very well.

There's no cheating with this. In sport you can cheat a bit or you can take drugs or steroids or whatever, but you can't really cheat with meditation, because the only person who is watching you and applauding from the stands is you. Well, not actually you; it's your ego. So you are only performing for your ego, which is not a very good audience. It takes a little time to realise that that drama is happening, and you have to decide if you want to play in that drama or not. In meditation, we are doing something in which you can't cheat, so it's a way of complete authenticity and truthfulness. You can't cheat yourself, your true self.

To begin to meditate really is to confront. In a way that is both

challenging but also wonderfully refreshing; it's a great discovery that you can be, in some moments of the day and in some aspect of yourself, completely truthful, completely honest. And that *must* involve your recognition and acceptance of the fact that you are not a perfect meditator.

So the first thing that has to be driven out of you is the virus of perfectionism – this feeling that we should be perfect, we should all look like these gold-medal athletes, or we should all be Mother Teresas. This virus of perfectionism has to be eradicated. The daily meditation is like your antibiotic; it just gets rid of it. We have all been infected by it. Perfectionism or the obsession with success is the first thing that has to be confronted because it's the most primitive enemy of the journey to wholeness. So we have to confront this one right at the beginning.

What we discover very quickly is distraction. Distraction is first of all felt as failure. We would like to sit there with clear and open minds; we've had maybe brief moments or taste of what a calm and clear and tranquil mind would be like. Then we sit to meditate, and we are thinking about dinner, or our diet, or our bank balance, or the TV programmes we are missing this week, or an argument that is running in our life, or a bad relationship, or sadness, or grief, or anger, or bitterness, or an addiction, some craving we find in ourselves.

Whatever it may be, that is what we'll find ourselves focused upon, and we might then conclude this is really a bit uncomfortable, a bit too real – I can't do it. We might well give up many times. But each time that we come back, each time we start again, we come back a little stronger. The exercise of returning is what strengthens us. It is like the resistance in any physical exercise; it is that giving and returning that strengthens the muscle.

Distraction, we could almost say, is a form of mental illness. It doesn't mean to say we're mad or that we are chronically neurotic, but you could say health is the ability to pay attention and to enter into the prayer of the Spirit. If that is health, you could say then that distraction itself is a kind of ill-health.

The Desert teachers, as they considered the state of distraction in which the human mind finds itself at the beginning of this

journey, virtually came to the conclusion that this is the same as original sin. Growing up, or being conditioned by this culture that we've created, which is a hyper-distracted culture, it is one extreme. But in any culture, even out in the deserts of Egypt where they found themselves, they discovered that this is the reality of the mind the person finds himself in. And it is, in a sense, no fault of your own.

Certainly for us, because everything for us is a hundred times, or a thousand times greater than it was in the past – the scale has increased so immensely – even for us in our hyper-distracted state, we can recognise the state of distraction. That's the first thing we have to do, before we start thinking too much about the goal, the ultimate wholeness or the ultimate health of the state of prayer, the first thing we have to do is to begin to break some of our addictions to distraction.

I was teaching in a business school earlier this year. I wasn't sure how it would go and what was the motivation of these second year MBA students, some of them twenty-seven or twenty-eight year old. Maybe they thought that Meditation and Leadership was an easy course for them to do. But in fact I realised quite quickly that they were very serious about it, and they were very dedicated to it. They really took up the practice. I said to them at the beginning, 'Your course commitment is that you should meditate twice a day for the next six weeks.' They achieved that to about seventy-three percent, which I thought was very good. It was encouraging to see how they responded to this, and by the end of the course how much they felt that it had touched them deeply. I met them a few months after the course finished, and the ones I met said, 'This is a part of my life now, maybe not meditating twice a day as often as I was during the course, but I'm doing it.'

The lowest scoring student in the course – his papers were not very enthusiastic, his meditation performance was about twenty percent – so, I shouldn't have done, but I formed a certain image of him. But when I met him and talked with him, as I did with each of them, I realised he probably got more out of the course than anybody else. He said: 'I know I hadn't done very well. I discovered something that has been quite shocking, and that is that I am totally

addicted to distraction. I can see it when I go home into my apartment every evening. I open the door and the first thing I do is I put on every electronic device I can find, and it's playing, it's going on and on. It's online everywhere.' And he said, 'When I go to bed at night, the last thing I do is I am holding my phone. I check messages and then I fall asleep holding the phone; and when I wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is check my messages.' He said, 'I think that's addiction, don't you?'

Yes, that is the first step. If you can't see that, recognise it, accept it, acknowledge it and share it, you're not going to get out of it. It is not going to go away by itself. So distraction is the first thing we discover. And then, in that sense, as Freud says, we are all sick. We are all distracted. It is another way of understanding sin rather than our legalistic view of sin, that sin is doing what we want to do, what we're not allowed to do – a rather childish view of sin like not eating sweets, but we want to eat them. That is not actually how we experience sin at all.

Sin, according to St Paul, is about a divided self. It is the addict who understands sin better than anybody. 'What I want to do is what I do not do,' St Paul says. 'What I don't want to do, that is what I find myself doing.' (Rom 7:15,19) Division within oneself is original sin and is the sickness of soul that we all have to deal with. ■

3

What Wholeness Means

Life often damages us; it often throws us off balance. Great losses, or great mistakes, or just the aging process, or disappointment of our hopes, or a broken relationship – any of these things is going to hurt us one way or another. Maybe they'll deeply destabilise us or shake our confidence in ourselves, or give us the feeling that we may not be able to make a new relationship after having suffered a great loss. So life itself requires a continuous putting together again, a reintegration – the healing of the self. But that healing of the self is, in fact, a contribution to health, to the expanding awareness that we call health.

But if we really think what wholeness means and relate it to these experiences, you could say wholeness is an experience of health as transcending all limitations. But that does not mean that we don't accept those limitations. Otherwise, we move into the fantasy realm of idealism – we want to try to be perfect; we want our family to be perfect; we want our marriage to be perfect.

So wholeness, we could say then, is our experience of health or our capacity to experience health as transcending all limitations while accepting them, overcoming this virus of perfectionism which keeps us locked into an imaginary world rather than the real world. So we have to accept our limitations, recognise them. But it is, paradoxically, in accepting them, that we can transcend them.

This is also then our capacity for awareness. You could be aware of somebody in need but just objectify it, look at it, think about it. But then awareness should naturally move up the scale into attention, which is your personal attention to the personal needs of that person; and then, that will naturally move even further up the scale into compassion. And compassion has this sense of identification or this sense of oneness with, and then that must lead to action.

In the experience of wholeness if we see it in this way, and in fact

of health if we see it in this way, we have a new working definition of health which is a little different from the one of the World Health Organisation – the complete absence of pain, injury or illness and a state of metabolic efficiency. We have a more meaningful, a more realistic way of understanding why we want to be healthy. What is our idea of health? How many of us really think of health in terms of wholeness? There is no health worth the word, no point in having a metabolically efficient body if your mind is sick or you are unhappy because of the way you are living. So health requires these other dimensions: the physical, the psychological and the spiritual as well.

The experience of wholeness is not dependent, in this sense, on external factors. As I said, people who are facing death, if they've been cared for and they have dealt with their conflicts, their inner conflicts and outer conflicts, they will usually say they have never been happier; they've never experienced a higher quality of life. So the experience of wholeness, of health, is not dependent upon external factors, at least as much as we think. We can be suffering and still be whole.

Of course, pain or disappointment threatens whatever sense of wholeness we may have reached. This is a fragile balance. Life is a fragile and unpredictable journey; anything can happen. But the wisdom traditions tell us that these trials and tribulations can also be integrated. The suffering can be integrated as a way of deepening and intensifying our experience of wholeness. Listen to what St James says:

My friends, you will always have your trials, but when they come, try to treat them as a happy privilege. You understand that your faith is only put to the test to make you patient. The patience, too, is to have its practical results, so that you will become fully developed, complete, with nothing missing. If there is anyone of you who needs wisdom, you must ask God who gives to all freely and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you. But you must ask with faith and with no trace of doubt because a person who has doubts is like the waves thrown up in the sea when the wind drives. That sort of person in two

minds, wavering between going different ways, must not expect that the Lord will, or you might say, can give him anything. (Jas 1:2-8)

This is pure universal wisdom. Every religious tradition is not consoling teaching, but it is wise teaching. It is something we listen to and we take away and we allow to mature and to penetrate us at the right time. And clearly what is at the heart of this ability to be made more whole by what wounds us is to be single-minded; it is this unity within the self. And if our attention is divided – that's what we mean by doubt – if our attention is divided, if we are distracted, then we lack the primary condition necessary for integrating pain into health.

That's worth thinking about when we look at our meditation too. If you only meditated when you've had a good meditation, it is going to take you a long time. If you meditate unwaveringly, you have this inner stability or this commitment or this regular practice, then it will have this effect, as James says, have 'practical results'. So meditation has very practical results, some of which you can even measure. But the more interesting ones you can't measure; this will be essentially the ability to grow in wholeness even through those experiences that seem to threaten us most painfully. ■

4

Attention and Healing

Attention, pure attention, is the opposite of distraction. If distraction is the sort of primal imperfection or primal state of dis-ease, then attention is healing. Attention is healthy and attention leads to wholeness.

The essence of prayer is attention, not intention, not wanting something. You do have to have an intention; otherwise, you'll never sit down to meditate. But as soon as you have started to meditate – the intention has brought you so far – you then change gears. The intention gets less and less intense or you become less and less aware of it, you don't think about the intention, and it evolves or leads you into pure attention.

So attention is healing and healthy. And anyone who has cared for anyone who is sick or tried to be with someone who is suffering will understand what that means. To give your attention to someone in need, in pain or in distress is the first step; and sometimes it's the only thing, the only step you can take.

Healing happens in relationship. A young woman told me the other day that she had treatment for breast cancer. She went back to see her doctor; and when she went into the room, he was looking at her file. His computer was on and he was looking at her file, and he was still looking at the file as he said, 'Sit down.' And, still looking at the file, not having looked at her yet, he said to her, 'Have I seen you before?' She said, 'No, but I saw you, because the last time I was here, you didn't look at me either.' So that put him on his back foot and he started to say, 'I'm very busy, I've to see so many people every day. I'm sorry...'

That loss of the healing relationship is something that concerns us deeply, and probably also, almost certainly, affects the healing process. That sense of connection and trust, that means of communicating compassion, within boundaries, but that relationship which

channels compassion and care, that's what the word 'medicine' comes from, and the way the prefix 'med' as in meditation means 'care and attention'.

We all know that we feel better when we receive other people's attention, and when we feel that we are being cared for when we are in need. And when the shoe is on the other foot and it is our responsibility or opportunity to give attention, to pay attention, we would all like to be able to do that generously and effectively, because we can see and we know the effect that has on the other person in their need.

Care and attention, even if it doesn't cure you of every ache and pain or even if it doesn't keep you physically alive, that care and attention is essential healing work because it makes you feel more whole. It makes you feel more human and loved. A little can go a long way. Even in a busy medical environment, or in the busy lives that people live, it is the quality of attention, rather than even the amount of time that you spend with the person, that makes the healing difference.

This is a healing story from the Gospel of Mark:

They reached Jericho. And as he left Jericho with his disciples and a large crowd, Bartimaeus, that is the son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting at the side of the road. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout and to say, 'Son of David, Jesus! Have pity on me!' And many of them scolded him and told him to keep quiet, but he only shouted all the louder. 'Son of David! Have pity on me!' Jesus stopped and said, 'Call him here.' So they called the blind man. 'Courage,' they said, 'get up, he's calling you!' So, throwing off his cloak, he jumped up and went to Jesus. And Jesus spoke, 'What do you want me to do for you?' 'Rabboni,' the blind man said to him, 'Master, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go, your faith has healed you.' And immediately, his sight returned and he followed him along the road. (Mk 10:46-52)

Just think about that story. The encounter, how brief it is; how single-minded Bartimaeus's appeal is, how total. That is faith. It is

not that he adhered to certain dogma or orthodoxy of belief. This is faith, this is pure connection, pure relationship. Remember the immediacy of Jesus' personal response. In this loud crowd, with all that noise, he heard Bartimaeus's genuine appeal. And then the question. Because it is a relationship, Jesus wasn't looking at his computer when Bartimaeus comes into the room. He said, 'What do you want me to do for you?' And Bartimaeus simply tells him, 'I want to see again.' There is no procedure here. The healing takes place in and through this connection – this healing connection - and all that Jesus says is, 'Okay, it's done! Go! Your faith has healed you. *Your* faith has been the power of this healing.' The faith was a connection.

It is a powerful little story, and the more one reflects on what it is saying, the more it takes us into the understanding of healing.

Just imagine how long this encounter with Jesus took for Bartimaeus. It is the quality of attention, the purity of attention, the present moment of attention that matters, and it is part of our own humility, part of our own limitations that we say 'we are not God'. We can't give unlimited total attention to every suffering person in the world. But those we are with, we can do so. So attention is health and it is part of the healing process itself. And that is why we all begin to feel better as soon as we receive attention.

The attention that makes a difference to us, that makes us feel healthier and happier and better, is essentially a selfless attention. It is when somebody turns their attention and, therefore, their self. 'Where your heart is, there your treasure is', Jesus said. So where your attention is, that's where *you* are, that's where you *are*. That's why attention, in this sense, is the heart of all relationships. Whether it's a thirty-year old marriage or your first date, it depends where your attention really is, and how that attention can be sustained, and grow.

So attention we could say is health. It is certainly health-giving; and it is an essential part of the healing process itself. When we look at the divine aspect of attention, the highest source of attention, then we might even say that attention is love. Attention is the healing process. We begin, in other words, to feel better as soon

as we receive attention. When we give our attention in that genuine way, selflessly and honestly, we feel better. And that, no doubt, explains something about meditation too.

Meditation is this work of attention, and it is a choice. It is a work to give your attention; it is not passive. It's a giving, but in the giving we also begin to experience that we are receiving. But it has to begin with the giving, and then, very quickly, the work of attention becomes something so beneficial, so delightful that, we don't exactly become addicted to it because it sets us free, but it certainly becomes a part of our life that we don't want to lose.

In meditation, we commit ourselves to and we begin to experience a growth, a development, a change within ourselves that is felt in every aspect of our life and all our relationships, simply because you are doing your best at this central point, the simplest and deepest part of yourself, to pay attention. That is all – just to be present, just to pay attention. You do your best in this work; in other words, you keep returning to the work of the mantra. You lay aside the feeling of failure or inadequacy when you feel overwhelmed by your distractions. You simply do your best, and that has a ripple effect from the centre outwards. It will begin to manifest itself and show itself – this quality of attention – in everything you do.

So in meditation then, we need to approach it with full recognition of our imperfection and get rid of this virus of perfectionism. But, at the same time, we do no less than our best. That's the approach that leads to growth and into a fuller wholeness as a person. If a person can be defined as someone who can pay attention, then your growth as a person, your personal growth, is the development or expansion of this capacity to pay attention.

As I mentioned yesterday, you may not be the first person to see it although you'll sense that it is happening, but somebody else that you work with or live with, or your children or your spouse or your fiancée, will say, 'You're changing.' ■

5

Meditation and Relationship

Meditation is about relationship. This is not how it is often packaged or presented in the media. In a hyper-individualistic culture like ours, health is seen to be a very individualistic thing – my health. This hyper-individualistic sense of self means that we look not only at medicine but at meditation in this very self-centred way: What is this going to do for me?

That may be where you start; you start where you are. But it is also why it is so important the way meditation is taught. In what direction is it pushing you? Is it towards a deeper and more inflated self-centeredness, which will eventually blow up in your face, of course? Or is it the beginning of a training in attention, where the attention becomes comprehensive rather than just self-centred; in other words, about relationship. One of the very first areas, in which we experience the changes of meditation in our life, is in our relationships, beginning in our relationship with ourselves.

Success is not about doing better than the next person, seeing life in terms of continuous competition and the struggle for survival and supremacy. But it's about how to be with others on the journey in a relationship of mutual support and encouragement. And children get that too. Children can see that when they meditate together, there is less bullying in the classroom. The experience of children is quite simply that they get on better with each other and they are happier. One child said in a class, 'I notice that if you ask people to do something before meditation they often say no, but after meditation they'll say yes.' This little girl said to me, 'If I've had a fight with someone and we wouldn't say sorry to each other, when we meditated we said sorry.' So meditation creates community as we know.

We were talking yesterday about the absence of eye contact in some relationships, and clearly if you're not aware what the person in front of you that you are talking to looks like, you are probably not

going to have that quality of awareness when you come to the decisions that you have to make. If you are feeling tired, emotionally empty, then that is not a good state for a healer to be in.

The first responsibility then, for any of us, is to heal ourselves: 'Physician, heal thyself.' The fact that this is a responsibility is very obvious when we look at this in terms of meditation. No one can force you to meditate. In fact, no one can persuade you to meditate; there's no argument in the end that's going to make you decide to meditate. Of course, you need to hear about it, you need to hear about it in a good way. And you need some support – we all need that – but at the end of the day it's going to be your choice to begin.

So our first responsibility, if we want to be in relationship and we want that relationship to be a healthy one and a healing one and a caring one for the people we are in relationship with, our first responsibility to others is to be as healthy and as happy as we can be ourselves. And that involves not being too hard on ourselves when we fail. In other words, we incorporate the sense of failure into our practice and learn from failure.

The practice of meditation gives us a deepening experience of wholeness and we begin to realise that attention or awareness, is something completely natural. It's the default to which we keep returning. However fit or metabolically efficient your body may be, you're not really healthy if you're self-fixated and unaware of those around you. You can hardly call that a state of health, of being healthy or being whole.

I was standing on the other side of the road recently, across the way from the supermarket, and I watched a woman come out carrying several overloaded bags. As she came out, an item fell out of one of the bags onto the ground and, of course, she was in a dilemma. What should she do? She couldn't lean down to pick it up because she was carrying these other bags. Imagine what we would all feel like in the situation.

You start to process certain options. One would be to put all the bags down and pick up your bar of soap and put it back in; but it would be quite difficult then to pick up all these bags again from the ground. You could imagine all this was going through her mind, so she

was just standing there for a few seconds, wondering about what to do. And of course, somebody came up and picked up the item for her and put it into the bag for her. Which, in other circumstances, would have been a bit intrusive, but because somebody is in need, you allow them in a little bit more into your private space.

It was a gesture of kindness. It could easily have been intrusive and presumptuous; but, because she was in need, it was and it was received as a small act of kindness. The person who did that then, like any good Samaritan should, just disappeared. It was clear that he wasn't doing this for any self-interest; just smiled and walked on. She said thank you and it was all over and done with.

You could imagine different ways of encountering that incident. You could, for example, have been standing there watching her come out, lost in your own thoughts. You see this little incident, this discomfort that she was facing, and you just look at it and you wonder what she was going to do; or you might even take out your camera and take a picture of it. And it is surprising that there is a high percentage of the population who would do just that. That would be as far as it went. Some people would not be aware of it at all; wouldn't even notice it. But others would observe it with a kind of observational awareness, but without response; without that spontaneous, natural, kind response of the person who didn't think about what they were doing. They just instinctively, intuitively and spontaneously came forward, saw the problem, picked it up and put it in the bag for her.

So you might be completely unaware of what's going on around you, just totally blind to people's needs; or you might observe those needs but without any sense of attention. It's when awareness becomes attention, and attention is always personal, so it's really when you move from just a sort of animal awareness to human attention that we begin to see the place of compassion and the source of compassion.

Compassion arises out of this awareness, and it is natural – you don't have to be a saint to feel concern for somebody suffering. But it's attention – personal attention – which then translates that into action and into, therefore, real relationship.

So our faculty of attention has to be developed. And I think that's what parents and teachers try to do for children. To not only get them through exams or to learn certain basic skills, but also to think of the needs of others, to be polite, to be courteous and to learn to pay attention, not just to be aware, but to pay attention.

First of all though, you need to have enough spare memory in order to be able to see it. If you are hyper-distracted and rushing and your mind is racing, then you may not even notice it at all. Even the first level of awareness is missing entirely. If you don't have the first level of awareness, it can't develop into attention, and it won't be focused in compassion. The root of awareness then taps into the spring of compassion. It brings care and attention together. That's what the prefix 'med' means, if you remember – *meditation*, *medicine*. It means 'care and attention', which is the skill set of any healer and of all healing relationships.

They say that regular meditators have thicker brains than other people, and more active frontal lobes. Tests, brain research on meditators show a decrease in the activity in those parts of the brain that forms the sense of space and time; and that makes sense. One of the reasons you perhaps feel less stressed after you meditate is because time is less of a pressure. And you also feel more empathy; you feel closer to other people rather than separated or alienated from them.

This illustrates – it doesn't explain – but it illustrates, perhaps, why meditation leads to a deeper sense of unity, which is our feeling of wholeness shared with another person. It certainly makes us feel better to feel whole, and our fragmented and distracted and anxious self recovers peace and harmony and a sense of togetherness and integration. We feel we're together; 'I got myself together', we say. That feeling of being drawn into unity and wholeness, that is certainly beneficial, and it is certainly a better way of living. But as soon as we do begin to experience our own wholeness, we then discover, amazingly, we can share this feeling of personal wholeness with others and all our relationships. ' ■

6

Spiritual Knowledge

Diadochos of Photiki, the fifth century monk of the Orthodox Church, has an entry in the *Philokalia* on spiritual knowledge:

All people are made in God's image, but to be in his likeness is granted only to those who, through great love, have brought their own freedom into subjection to God.

In the first chapter of Genesis, God made man and woman in 'his image and likeness'; and these two phrases make an important distinction. We are all created in the image of God, which means every human being has equal dignity. However handicapped, socially inadequate, or however great or famous, it doesn't matter. Every human being, by virtue of their humanity, being an icon of God, enjoys equal dignity and basic rights. That's a very fundamental, far-reaching, revolutionary statement, the first page of the Bible.

We are made in God's image and likeness – he interpreted this to mean that we are all created in God's image, but because we are human and because we share in the freedom of God's nature, we have to develop, we have to grow. We participate, in a sense, in our own creation, because as we grow in consciousness, as we move from awareness to attention, and to compassion, to action, we are evolving, we are growing.

When do we stop growing? We don't. As we know, the last moments of life may teach us and may transform us more powerfully than longer periods of our life beforehand, and this transformation is making us into his likeness.

So all people are made in God's image, but to be in his *likeness* happens only through great love – 'through great love have brought their own freedom into subjection to God'. We don't like losing our freedom, but we should understand what it means. Your own freedom in this sense would be your ego. This is seeing yourself as an isolated individual who is defined by the choices you have. And

you cling tenaciously to your freedom of choice, which also, of course, makes it very difficult for us to commit ourselves to anything wholeheartedly because we feel we should always keep an option open.

So what does it mean to really give your freedom? We fear that because we fear we would be denigrating ourselves or reducing ourselves in some way. But what he is saying here is that the ego has to bow down before the true self. The human being has to recognise the higher power.

'For only when we do not belong to ourselves, do we become like him.' Only when we do not belong to ourselves in the way the ego naturally tries to protect and assert itself, and belong to nothing or no one that would take that freedom away, only when we overcome that tendency to belong only to ourselves, do we actually become *like* him, who through love has reconciled us to himself. So, again, we have to take the attention off ourselves – discover what a true love of self means, the healing work of this transformative work of taking the attention off ourselves, where we let go of ourselves – then we actually become *like* the One who has loved us.

The idea here is that our ultimate meaning and purpose, and what gives meaning to all the experiences of our lives, even the worst, is that we are destined to be like him. St John says:

What we are going to be like we do not know. But we do know, however, that we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he truly is. (1 Jn 3:2)

There is a vision here, or a knowledge here; and in this kind of language, seeing and knowing and loving mean much the same thing from different angles: To see is to know and to know is to love. In this non-dualistic realm, this is what spiritual knowledge means.

The seeing and the knowing and the loving change us into what we see and know and love. All of this comes, perhaps, in the theological sense, from the idea of the Incarnation: God became human. God saw and knew and loved us and became human.

By following that logic, the Fathers of the Church came to this beautiful, sublimely simple statement: 'God became human so that

human beings might become God.' They said that; they didn't even say 'become *like* God', but they said 'become God'.

Similarly, the same thing that Jesus was saying: 'May they be one as you Father are in me and I in them; may we all be completely one (Jn 17:20).' This oneness is what it means. So, 'only when we do not belong to ourselves, do we become like him who, through love, reconciled us to himself.'

'No one achieves this,' he says, 'unless he persuades his soul not to be distracted by the false glitter of this life.' So, we engage with this destiny. This is what self-knowledge means. This is what finding out meaning means. This is what we basically mean when we say 'I'm trying to find my direction in life'. This is the fundamental truth and purpose. Spiritual knowledge is the discovery of our fundamental purpose.

The meaning that we need in order to live and endure and survive and keep moving is an experience of connection. That's why when people die, that's what they want. They want to feel connected, especially to those people who, for one reason or another over life, they may have become disconnected from.

'No one achieves this unless he persuades his soul' That's a nice expression, persuading your own soul. It recognises the fact that this is going to be work. You have to persuade your soul, not force it, not beat it into submission, but persuade it.

So what do you do? You cultivate your motivation. Do you want to do it? Would you like to meditate? If you'd really like to meditate, persuade your soul that this might be a good thing to do and get into it, get into the habit of it. So we need to persuade ourselves gently, and with whatever means works for us, that this is something we should do. And what is it? 'Not to be distracted by the false glitter of this life.'

Well, the great mystics were not world haters, not world deniers in any way or life deniers; but they came to this love of beauty because they were able, in their spiritual knowledge to see the difference between the false and the true. Just being there before the Lord, in truthfulness and simplicity, in stillness in silence, the false glitter – which is the way the ego dresses itself up or attracts us

to itself – just begins to drip away; it begins to melt. There's a certain sadness in seeing it go because it gave us some pleasure, it gave us illusion, it gave us a place of escape; but ultimately it causes more trouble than it is worth. That false glitter just melts away in the light, in the light of the true self.

Spiritual knowledge is the result of total attention: 'Set your mind on God's kingdom before everything else and all the rest will come to you as well.' (Mt 6:33) 'Happy are those who are pure of heart because they shall see God.' (Mt 5:8) Spiritual knowledge is a way of perception that arises from a clear and awakened centre of consciousness: 'Be still and know that I am God.' (Ps 46:10) This is a knowledge that arises from stillness rather than just from intellectual activity, and it is marked, therefore, by the contemplative qualities of silence, stillness and simplicity.

Spiritual knowledge is not the same as religious belief. Religious belief without spiritual knowledge can be very empty and hollow. Spiritual knowledge is the result of total attention which we could describe as 'a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything' as Mother Julian described it.

If something costs everything, what are you left with? Nothing. In the two parables which Jesus uses to describe the kingdom of Heaven – the treasure that the man finds buried in the field; the pearl of great value that the merchant finds – in both these cases the persons sell everything they have, *everything* they have, in order to buy this pearl or this treasure.

There is this direct relationship between having nothing and having everything; between poverty of spirit, the first of the Beatitudes, and the kingdom of God. That's why we let go of everything. And that's why in all the great mystical traditions we have the terms like *nothingness*, *emptiness*, *poverty*, to describe what we go through or what we enter into on this journey. 'Nada! Nada! Nada!' says St John of the Cross; or Cassian: 'By the continuous repetition of this single verse, you renounce all the riches of thought and imagination, and come with ready ease to the first of the Beatitudes, poverty of spirit.' So our meditation is on this wavelength of mystical wisdom, of spiritual knowledge, of our tradition.

When we begin a contemplative practice, some people sometimes are zapped powerfully, knocked off their horse on the road to Damascus. But most of us begin a contemplative practice and then this new way of knowing, spiritual knowledge, begins to make sense and it begins to influence every aspect of your life and work.

It will affect the way you see yourself as a teacher, as a medical practitioner, as a businessperson. It must influence every thought and action that you are responsible for. Meditation makes spiritual knowledge real; and it embodies it in daily life and experience at all levels – physical, mental and spiritual. And in this way of knowing then, the words of scripture begin to glow. They begin to acquire a level of meaning, an ability to communicate to a new way of knowing, a new kind of experience that is being released in us.

‘In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead embodied.’ (Col 2:9) We possess the mind of Christ. ‘The Lord gives wisdom; from His face comes knowledge and understanding.’ (Prov 2:6) So this knowledge comes from personal experience. ■

The first thing that has to be driven out of you is the virus of perfectionism, the most primitive enemy of the journey to wholeness.

We have all been infected by the virus. Meditation is like your antibiotic; it just gets rid of the virus



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In these talks, Fr Laurence focuses on the deeper levels and meaning of health. Health he says is not the absence of pain, suffering and death, and not a product to be delivered by medical science. It is better understood positively as our capacity for wholeness, in which everything including illness or disability is integrated and where Jesus is the 'divine physician'. Meditation, he says, is healing work. It reintegrates us body, mind and spirit, and aligns us on the One who is one, who is whole. So meditation brings us to health as an experience of wholeness.

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