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The Ego

on our Spiritual Journey I

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Laurence Freeman is a Benedictine monk of the Olivetan Congregation and Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation. He is author of many books and CDs. These talks offer fresh insight on the problem of the ego and the role of asceticism. The ego is a great force in today's consumer society but, Fr Laurence says, there is a natural gravity in the human soul that draws it towards God. This is the primary human will. The way to recover this primary will is asceticism, and the single word in meditation is a way of ascesis that strikes at the root of the ego. These talks were given to the monks at Gethsemani Abbey in 1992.



*This is a transcript of talks given by Laurence Freeman
to the monks of Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, USA
in 1992.*

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1

The Ego

This is from the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke:

And to all he said, "If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind; day after day he must take up his cross and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake, that man is saved. What will a man gain by winning the whole world, at the cost of his true self?" (Luke 9:23-26)

The great hindrance to this journey, this following of Christ, is the way in which we falsely identify ourselves with our ego. Perhaps we as religious people take it a little too much for granted that it is a good thing to leave self behind. I was once talking to a rather successful business-woman in New York who came to a talk I was giving there. I gave this talk on leaving ego behind, which you wouldn't think anyone could really object to. She came up afterwards and said, "What nonsense you are talking! I don't want to leave my ego behind." She said, "I am my ego." At least I think she had a clear sense of what she believed. We, most of us, identify ourselves with our ego, unconsciously.

As we do the work of this prayer, we come to understand ourselves, our ego, more clearly. We see that the ego is both the cause and the state of suffering. The Buddha said: life is suffering, and suffering is life. He is referring, I suppose, to the ego.

The ego manifests itself in many ways and gets into everything. It can get into our spiritual work, into our spiritual journey. We don't lose the ego when we come into a religious life. We don't lose the ego even when we begin to pray. There are certain signs of the ego's activity that we become more aware of as we become more simple.

The first sign of the ego is the desire to be great, the desire for example to be number one, the desire to dominate. Then there is the desire to take; the ego wants to take, rather than give or rather than let be. The ego desires to keep, to hang on, to cling, to possess, not to let go. The ego desires to advance, to get more, to be more, to know more, to own more. The ego desires to hold on to everything even at the expense of others, putting ourselves, in other words, before others. Those characteristics of egoism are characteristics of every activity, spiritual, physical, and mental, that we might be involved in. So there is a real danger, particularly for the religious person, of an egotistical spirituality. A spirituality that desires to be great, that desires to take an experience of God or holiness, to keep it, to gain more, and to hold on to it even at the expense of others.

The sayings of the Fathers of the Desert are really a constant commentary upon the dangers of an egotistical spirituality. This is perhaps why St John of the Cross tells us to give up all desire, even the desire for God. Not the love of God, not our innate longing for God which we cannot give up, but our *desire* for God – the desire to possess, to control, to own, to keep God. In this way of prayer, in the simple

asceticism of the single word, we strike at the 'root of sin', as *The Cloud of Unknowing* called it, at the root of our ego. We let go. There's a phrase in Alcoholics Anonymous: Let go, let God.

Of course, the ego is a natural stage of the development of our humanity. The ego develops at a certain age in a child, and the ego is a necessary and useful force or tool, instrument, of consciousness. Without an ego, we won't be able to communicate with each other. We wouldn't be able to relate to others. It isn't that the ego is bad in itself. There is nothing in human nature that is in itself bad. Therefore Jesus who was fully human must have had an ego. And yet Jesus did not sin: a man like us in all things but sin.

How do we understand the problems of egoism? All these hindrances, all these faults can even get into our spiritual life. But if we look at Jesus, what we see, I think, is a man who certainly had an ego, who could say "I" and who had a will, who could give up his ego and his will at the end of his life: "not as I will but as you will". So we see a man who had an ego, and clearly a strong ego, but a man who did not sin, because he never identified himself with his ego. He never said "I am my ego." That was the great temptation that he went through in the desert, to identify himself with the tendencies of egoism. He was tempted. The ego clearly manifested its tendencies in him, but he never identified his *real* self with the ego. We who have sinned have the work of detaching ourselves from that identification, breaking that identification, simply waking up, in other words, to the fact that we have an ego, and it is a useful thing as long as it is there, but it is not who I am. The ego is not my true and deepest identity.

This presents I think a great challenge to modern culture, our contemporary society, because the ego is so hyper-activated in our society. The ego is the great force of a technological and consumer society, the technological society which wants to be in control of everything, and a consumer society that is dominated by desire. What we have to be particularly careful of in such a culture is the creation of a consumer spirituality or a technological spirituality, a spirituality that becomes identified with psychological techniques, for example. Or a spirituality that becomes identified only with the desires of spiritual jollies, spiritual pleasures.

This is the role of asceticism in a society like ours. It is the understanding that asceticism, and the essential asceticism of the Christian life, is prayer. Asceticism is the way in which we recover the primary will in the human person. The primary will is deeper than the desires of our ego. The primary will is our natural inclination, tendency towards God, what the early Cistercian fathers called the *pondus*, the natural gravity in the soul that draws us towards God. The purpose of asceticism is not to crush the will or to punish, but to clear away, to clear the blocks, to unfold the mind, and to reveal this essential goodness at this core of the human person, so that what we do is right and what we wish to do is right. And, in this way of prayer, in the simple asceticism of the single word, we strike at the root of our ego.

2

The True Self

Jesus uses the phrase, “our true self”: “What will a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his *true self*?” (Luke 9:25)

It is very difficult to answer that question: What is the self? What is my true self? It is really rather indefinable. But it is evidently of some importance that we understand what it means because it is for this reason that we are doing all the work of leaving our false self behind.

It’s rather indefinable, but I came across a very wonderful phrase from a seventh century Indian philosopher. He says: “The self is the inner light. It is self-evident and it does not become an object of perception.”

In the Gospel of Thomas, there is this secret saying of Jesus, “The Kingdom is within and without you. If you will know yourselves, you will be known. And you will know that you are sons of the living Father.”

I think it is to that, that Jesus is referring when he replies to the Pharisees in the Gospel of Luke when the Pharisees ask him, “When will the Kingdom of God come?” He said: “You cannot tell by observation when the Kingdom of God will come. There will be no saying ‘Look here it is or there it is’ for in fact the Kingdom of God is within you”. (Luke 17:20-21) If we see a connection, which I think we must, between the Kingdom of God and the true self, what they have in common if they are not in fact the same thing is that we can’t observe them. We can’t say, “look, there it is” or ‘here it is’. The Kingdom of God is the *experience* of our true self, and it does not admit of observation. In other words, it is beyond self-consciousness. It is beyond the normal or familiar activities of the mind by which we objectify something and analyse it and label it. We are doing this constantly whether we are intellectuals or not. We are constantly intellectualising things, objectifying things.

Perhaps it helps to see this true self that we cannot observe in relation to the ego. A story is perhaps the best way of capturing it. It is the story of a man who does a favour to some angel and, as a reward, he is given a servant. This servant is a rather magical servant who will do anything the master wants. This is a wonderful thing to have and so for quite a few days, the master uses his servant for getting everything he wants. But after a few days, he has got everything he wants, and he wants the servant just to keep quiet. But then he discovers that the servant is irrepressible. The servant is constantly coming to him, and not giving him a moment’s rest and always asking for things to do, so much so that he begins totally to wear his master down and exhaust him. The man is brought almost to the point of collapse until he comes up with a bright idea. He sets a big pole in the middle of the courtyard. Whenever the servant comes to him, asking for something to do and the master does not want to give him anything to do, he says, “Go run up and down the pole until I tell you to stop.” It is rather a nice story describing perhaps the relationship between the true self and the ego, and even expressing something of the mystery of prayer. The running up and down of the pole could be described as our prayer. All prayer has this repetitive

quality, the stilling of the mind bringing us to equanimity, to *quies*. a discipline, and a repetitive discipline such as the mantra, keeping the ego in its place: The radical renunciation of our false identification with our ego. It is this unself-conscious state which is the condition of our true self.

It's why we cannot look at the true self. Just as St Irenaeus says that God cannot become an object of our knowledge. We can only know God by sharing in God's own self-knowledge. We can never say, "Look, there is God", as if God were something or someone separate and outside of us. God can never be an object of our knowledge. The Spirit of God is the self-knowledge of God. And the great Christian revelation is that the gift of the Spirit, the whole purpose and meaning of the life and mission of Jesus, the sending of the Spirit is the sending of this self-knowledge of God, the love of Father and Son that involves us, absorbs us, into the knowledge of God. We can only know God by being led into the Spirit of God.

So just as we cannot look at God as an object, we cannot look at the true self that we are. In the same way, we cannot look at another self. We can't say, "My true self is looking at your true self." What Jesus is describing is a self-less state, or rather an ego-less state, in which we are able to see, know and love Christ in each other because we see, know and love Christ in ourselves. The state of looking at someone as if they are separate from us is the egotistical state, the state of duality and separateness. It is in this state, in which we are usually engaged with each other, my ego relating to your ego, that we either find each other attractive or unattractive. We either agree or we disagree. We either like or we don't like. We love or we hate. We judge or we pardon. All of those activities that relate us to each other, and these are vital activities of community, are at the level of the ego. In a Christian community, we are aiming to meet each other, not at the level of our separate egos, but in Benedict's vision: "To love one another at the level of our true self, where we are one, and where the unity we have with each other is nothing less than Christ himself." We cannot separate Christ from our true self. I don't know whether one could say that Christ is our true self, but we cannot separate Christ from our true self.

If we have found our true self, then we have found that wavelength in which we can relate to each other in a truly loving way, truly compassionate, truly in empathy, truly non-judgemental, truly tolerant, putting up with the weaknesses of body and character in each other. This is very much related to our relationships with each other, very much related to forgiveness, for example. We cannot truly forgive one another unless we are in touch with our own true identity, our own essential goodness. We cannot forgive one another, and therefore we cannot enter into relationship with one another, unless we are in touch with that true self. The process of forgiveness occupies such an important place in the Christian vision precisely for this reason – because it is in the process of forgiveness that we detach from our ego and find our true self, from which experience we find the power to love one another. Christ is the supreme example and teacher of that. It is in this pure prayer that the ego is transcended. In the transcendence of the ego, reconciliation and communion become possible.

So having found the self, the true self, we come to the condition of God, of being unconditionally loving. That is our call to "be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect", our heavenly Father who shines on the good and bad alike, who loves good and bad equally. We are called to love in that way, to know each other in that way, in the common ground of being, to know and love each other in God. We can only do that if we have found our true self, this true self that we cannot look at, but the true

self that we are, that we simply are. This is why the starting point for any spiritual journey of this kind has to be the recognition and the affirmation of our essential goodness. That's probably the most difficult point for most of us to get to because until we have got to that point we cannot really believe that this journey is possible. Perhaps, indeed, until we have come to that belief of our essential goodness, we are even frightened of finding out who we really are.

Egoless Prayer – Pure Prayer

Our ego is not our true self. In pure prayer, the ego is transcended. It is in that work of pure prayer that our false identification with the ego is gradually diminished, and the true self begins to emerge. I think it was Merton who talked about the true self as like a shy deer that does not like to come out of the woods; it does not like to be looked at.

From the teachings of Cassian, the Desert Fathers, and the whole monastic tradition, it is very clear that the purity of prayer is its egolessness. Pure prayer means ‘without ego’, ‘without self-consciousness, self-analysis’. The prayer in which we are analysing what is happening, watching what we are getting out of it, is not pure prayer. That’s why the first rule of meditation is to meditate without demands or expectations, and without judging your meditation in fact in any way, finding the fruit of our prayer not in what happens during the meditation but in our life as a whole, in the transformation of our personality. This egoless prayer is precisely what St Anthony is referring to when he says, quoted by Cassian: “The monk who knows that he is praying, is not praying. The monk who does not know that he is praying, he is truly praying.”

We see the same understanding of prayer in the Syriac tradition. The Syriac Fathers say very simply: “If we are to pray, we must lose *my* prayer.” We must go beyond ‘my prayer’; and leaving my prayer behind, enter into the prayer of Christ. What this suggests to us is the prayer of Christ himself. All forms of prayer, all methods of prayer, whether it is the Divine Office, whether it is any devotional form, even if it is Scripture itself, any form, ritual or method of prayer is only preparatory, or a reminder, or an incentive, or an encouragement to go deeper into the purity of un-self-conscious prayer, into the prayer of Christ.

The same is true ultimately of the mantra, the formula of Cassian. There comes perhaps a time, when we stop saying the mantra, when we are led into pure silence, pure simplicity. But it is very important for us I think to be cautious about how we understand that. Remember the “*pax pernicioso*” and the *sopor letalis*, the lethal sleep and the pernicious peace. The purpose of the mantra is not just to lead us to quiet but to lead us beyond the ego, beyond all sense of ‘I’. That’s why a very simple way of describing this would be to say: “Say your word until you can no longer say it. We do not choose when to stop saying it. And as soon as you realise you have stopped saying it, then simply start saying it again.” The problem comes when we are meditating and we are led into a state of quiet. There are maybe no distractions or very few distractions and we feel very peaceful, and then we say to ourselves: “I am silent; I don’t need to say the mantra anymore.” The problem of course is that if we say we are silent, we are breaking the silence. The thought “I am silent” is a sign that we have not yet become fully simple, totally simple; we are still self-reflective. And there is the radical simplicity of Cassian’s teaching, why he insists to say the mantra in times of adversity and in times of prosperity.

In pure prayer, there is the absence of ‘I’ as a separate ego, and even the absence of God as an object of perception, all ideas and images of God. This is a description,

of course, of apophatic prayer, and the whole of this tradition of pure prayer is in the apophatic tradition. In the Greek Orthodox Church, the relationship between apophatic prayer (prayer that takes us beyond all thought and words and statements about God) and kataphatic prayer (prayer in which we use words, thoughts and images), the Orthodox thinkers believe that these are two valid forms of prayer, two dimensions, but they give the priority to the apophatic, prayer that takes us beyond all statements and images about God.

When we think of prayer, indeed the whole of our life, we need to see poverty as the working goal, the goal that we are working towards. If we were to say “What is the goal of our life?” we would probably say “liberation” or “salvation” or “enlightenment”. And we would say that renunciation is the means by which we come to this goal. There always seems something wrong in that. But if we put it the other way around, there seems something very right about it. The goal is renunciation; and liberation or enlightenment is the means. In other words, we are never trying to possess the goal, never trying to make an object of God, never trying to look at our true self. If renunciation is the goal, if poverty is the goal, then we have arrived, no doubt why poverty of spirit is the first of the Beatitudes. It is in that poverty that we find joy, because the goal is realised, it is never achieved. The process of prayer is the process of realising what *is*, not of making something happen.



4

Our True Self – A Child of God

Jesus says that the true self is the highest value in life: “What will a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self?” (Luke 9:25)

The true self that we’ve been talking about, that we realise as we detach from the identification with our ego, the true self that Jesus says is the highest value in life, that true self is a child, a child of God. In this true self that we are, we are more truly a child of God than we are even a child of our parents. We have a higher reality or a more essential reality as a child of God, that being our fundamental relationship into which all our other relationships are rooted. As a child of our parents, we have a psychological and physical identity, and that has, clearly, a certain reality. But the most basic reality is that reality we have as a child of God. Realising that, finding that true self, is the work of contemplation. Contemplative experience doesn’t rely upon something abstract, but it’s something practical and real and ordinary in the best sense of the word ordinary, something normal.

In the New Testament, the teaching of Jesus in particular, the Kingdom experience seems to be what we mean by the contemplative experience. When Jesus talks about the Kingdom, he talks about childlikeness: “Unless you become like a little child, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” It’s this childlike quality that makes it possible for us to enter, and live in, continually, the contemplative dimension of our faith.

The most basic reality is that reality we have as a child of God. Realising that, finding that true self, is the work of contemplation. This child of God that we are is called to be a fully mature child. Karl Rahner has a marvellous essay somewhere on this quality of childlikeness. He says that the quality of a child, ‘childliness’, he says, is openness. The quality of an adult child, a fully mature child, is unbounded openness. A very wonderful description of sanctity: unbounded openness. That’s a definition or understanding of holiness, wholeness, that allows many different types of holiness, many different ways of entering this contemplative experience. We cannot be whole unless we are the unique person that we are. Following a discipline doesn’t mean crushing our individuality or becoming something that we are not. But to be an adult child, to be our true self, is to be unboundedly open to the unique person that God has created us to be, and that conditions have formed us to be, with our wounds and handicaps.

Rahner says God will be found by anyone who has the courage to keep up his childhood, the courage to remain open to this essential identity that we are. He says this: “A human person is a child embarking on the wondrous adventure of remaining a child forever, or rather, becoming ever more fully a child. His maturity and his divinisation are just ever fuller actuations of his childliness.” So even our divinisation is simply the full development of our essential identity as a child of God.

We can see the relationship between contemplative experience and contemplative being and childlikeness in a child. Children are natural contemplatives in some ways; not fully conscious, but because of their relative lack of self-

consciousness, they are able to enter fully into what we call the contemplative dimension. The less self-conscious we are, the more contemplative we are, and the more ordinary and open we are as well. It's a very wonderful thing to pray with children. We have many small groups of children, meditation groups, usually started by parents who have been meditating for some time, and who feels a natural sense of wanting to introduce their children as early as possible to this dimension of prayer. It's a wonderful thing to see that and to see how naturally, how ordinarily a child can sit in stillness and in silence and do this inner work that Cassian describes, the work of saying the mantra. The child doesn't necessarily find it easy, but they find it natural. The wonderful quality of the child is, of course, they don't ask lots of questions about, you know, is this infused, recollection, grace, the prayer of simplicity. They don't ask all these theological or psychological questions. They do the work. They are simple. It has, I think, a very wonderful formative effect upon their faith. They have this natural capacity for pure prayer, the experience of God, the Kingdom. This capacity tends to be either lost or overshadowed as they get older. It seems that part of their religious formation should be exposure to this.

As we do the work (*The Cloud of Unknowing* always calls this pure prayer the work), and as our true self is realised more clearly, certain changes appropriate to that of a child, an adult child, begin to appear within us.

These are some of the qualities of a child. Innocence, for example. We associate innocence with childlikeness. For an adult, this innocence of the child would be, for example, purity of motive. We do things for simpler and simpler reasons. We come to a singleness of mind about what we do. We do it attentively. We do it without duplicity, without ulterior motives. We do it with simplicity.

Generosity is the characteristic of a child, at least sometimes. As a child of God, as an adult child, this generosity is expressed in the way we give ourselves, the way we surrender, the way we abandon ourselves if you like, the way we can commit ourselves. All those are expressions of this generosity of a child. The ability to respond to the call of the gospel to let go of everything, poverty of spirit in the inner life, depends upon this quality of generosity. We believe that if we give everything, if we leave everything behind, we will receive it back a hundredfold. But the problem is believing that often makes us prepared to give it all up provided we get it back a hundredfold. We lay down a condition. We say, I'll give all this up, provided I get this back. That is a lack of generosity. Coming to that generosity is the work of grace. It's the work of simplification.

A child is characterised also by courage, a lack of fear, at least in a healthy child. Usually the courage of a child is so great the parents have to look after it, to protect it. But it's the courage too that comes to us as a child of God, as we realise our true self, the courage to risk our life, to lay down our life, to let go of our familiar identity. There's a wonderful phrase in Heraclitus in the early Greek philosophers: "If we can stop thinking about our troubles, it will generate courage." Taking the attention off our problems, our troubles and worries, moving beyond the egocentric state, generates courage. There I suppose, is the teaching of Jesus, as he tells us so often in the Gospels: particularly in the Resurrection appearances, not to fear; in the sermon on the mount, not to worry, neither worry nor fear. These aren't just consoling remarks. These are injunctions to us not to worry, to move beyond fear and worry, which we do in our prayer

Finally, the quality of truth, truthfulness. A child naturally tells the truth; a child loses its innocence, or its innocence is compromised, when it encounters for the first time the dishonesty of adults. We recover that truthfulness through our prayer, within the contemplative life, because we lose our fear. Our fears gradually decrease – the fear of being known, the fear of being vulnerable. We hide the truth because we are frightened. We fear revealing our false identity. But if we knew that our false identity is false, if we know that our ego is not our true self, then we don't mind letting the ego be seen a little bit. We don't feel we have to cover up, to appear better than we are. That's humility. Truthfulness is simply humility or self-knowledge, allowing ourselves to be seen, to know ourselves as we really are.

Those are some of the practical changes which would be observable, at a psychological and at a social level, as a result of this work of pure prayer.



5

Christ in Contemplative Experience

This is from the Gospel of John:

He entered his own realm, and his own would not receive him. But to all who did receive him, to those who had yielded him their allegiance, he gave the right to become children of God, not born of any human stock or by the fleshly desire of a human father, but the offspring of God himself. And so the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us and we saw his glory, the glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. (Jn. 1:10-14)

We've been talking about the way of pure prayer, transcending our ego and the contemplative experience. What is the meaning of Christ in transcending our ego and the contemplative experience?

It's clear that the contemplative experience is not restricted to those who believe in Christ. That's a very important question for us as modern people to address. This coming era is the era where Christianity will meet the other great world religions, and it will be as epoch-making an encounter as the days when the early Judaeo-Christians met the Greeks. It will be another great stage in the universalisation of the gospel when we are able to express the Christian experience and meaning in terms and symbols other than those we have been familiar with: a contemporary encounter with other religions in which we often meet people who have transcended their ego, examples of great holiness, people who are living and pursuing a contemplative life. It raises the question of where Christ for us gives meaning, and ultimate meaning, to our experience.

In pure prayer, for the Christian, Christ is the centre of the whole experience. We have been talking about the basic theology of Christian prayer, that we are leaving our own prayer behind. As we leave our ego behind, we leave behind that which can say, 'I' or 'mine'. So if we are really practising a prayer that takes us beyond our ego, it doesn't make sense anymore to say this is 'my prayer'. That intuition was recognised by the Desert Fathers when they said that the monk who knows he is praying, who is self-conscious about 'my own prayer', has not yet really begun to pray, has not reached the full purity of prayer.

Yet in pure prayer, although Christ is the centre, Christ is not an object of thought because there is no thought. The mind becomes still. Christ is not an object of our imagination. We are moving beyond the realm of the imagination, beyond thoughts and images. We're not speaking to Christ in words. We are becoming silent, leaving all words behind. Yet, experience shows that our meditation, our pure prayer, is deepening our personal relationship with Christ continually. Deepening our understanding and our experience of our relationship, indeed our union, with Christ, the union with Christ that we experience and discover at the level of our true self, in other words, beyond the ego. To experience relationship at the level of our true self involves moving beyond a sense of duality or separateness. If I meet you at this level

of our true self, then we are not conscious of separation; we are conscious of a union, love. This is the fruit of meditation practised in Christian faith. Pure prayer deepens our knowledge and love of Christ.

Indeed this pure prayer, practised with Christian faith and in a Christian context clarifies, makes clearer who Christ is. We begin to see Christ in a more and more universal sense. We certainly meet Christ within the terms of our own culture, our own vocation. But the Christ we meet within our own culture, within our own tradition, is the universal, cosmic Christ who fills every culture, and can manifest himself and mediate himself through any tradition.

We must meet Christ as the personal presence in ourselves. That is the most authentic. We will never be fulfilled, we will never be satisfied, we will not have reached our goal until we have met this presence which is within ourselves. It is not enough for us to meet Christ indirectly as it were through the outward signs of our religion, our practice or of our culture. All of these are signs pointing us towards this deepest, most personal encounter with Christ within ourselves.

We meet Christ most purely and authentically at the level of the personal, within the relationship we have with ourselves, why we have to do the work of self-knowledge and purification, asceticism, get into a good relationship with ourselves. And also we meet Christ within our relationship with others.

The Christ we meet is the risen Christ, the present Christ. The figure of Jesus that we encounter in the New Testament, in scripture or in theology and thought, is more of an indirect encounter. It's of great value and importance, but not as purely personal, or as purely real, as the Christ we meet at this personal level of relationship. But I think we come to value the historical Jesus expressed in the words of scripture more as a result of our meditation, our pure prayer.

Meditation leads to a deeper reading of scripture, a deeper intuitive understanding of what the words mean, what those inspired words are mediating to us. Cassian says this very clearly, that one of the fruits of this pure prayer is that we will come to read scripture as if we were the author of it; in other words, more and more at the level of experience. The experience in scripture is resonating with our own personal experience. By letting go of the images and thoughts at the time of meditation, we come back to those images and thoughts at the time of lectio with a great deal more to gain. The word is indeed incarnate in scripture, as the early fathers said. But our ability to recognise and relate to the incarnate Word in scripture depends on the depth of our personal encounter with the Word in our hearts. Scripture is a kind of mirror of what is within our hearts personally. The historical Jesus in scripture mirrors or reflects back the risen Jesus within our own hearts.

Prayer itself is not a theological exercise. It is so damaging to Christian faith if we limit prayer just to the level of mental prayer, to discursive meditation, to thoughts and images and imagination. Those are the tools of theological thought and exploration, valuable but not enough. Prayer is not a theological exercise, although according to Evagrius, it makes us true theologians. "The one who truly prays is a theologian, and a theologian is one who truly prays," he says.

Prayer is itself though an encounter, a personal encounter. Redemption is the result of a meeting, a personal encounter, rather than an exchange of ideas or opinions or views. And the whole person is involved in this kind of encounter, in a redemptive encounter of this kind. Our journey to wholeness and holiness is inseparable from our

relationship with Christ. Christ indeed heals us psychologically, spiritually, maybe even physically, in order for us to come to a wholeness in which we can know him fully, and be redeemed by that knowledge.



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The Prayer of Faith

Meditation is pre-eminently the prayer of faith. We know Christ, not through thought primarily, but through faith. Meditation, pure prayer, is the prayer of faith. Leaving thoughts and words and so on behind leaves us with the word, the mantra, the act of pure faith. It makes us realise by experience what faith is. Faith is not our systems of belief. Faith is not the same as our theology. Faith is our relationship with another person. Faith is our capacity to be in relationship. We talk, for example, about being faithful to our community, faithful in marriage, faithful in friendship. Faith is the capacity we have, and the gift we have, to be in relationship. It is only when we are in relationship that we can know another person. It's not so much the thoughts that we have, but the relationship that we have.

Most of us received the beginning of our relationship with Christ as children. Jesus was like a family friend, one of the grown-ups in our families, friend of our parents, and priests, and teachers. As we mature, we come to know this family friend as a mature person in our own right, to know him personally. Faith grows and develops.

Our faith in Jesus is built not upon what is said about him so much as what he has said about himself, built upon his own self-knowledge. That is where his authority lies, just as our own faith in ourselves, for example, is built much more upon what we know about ourselves than what others may say about us.

What Jesus has said about himself is this: the seven *I am* of Jesus:

I am the true vine. (John 15:1)

I am the way, the truth and the life. (John 14:6)

I am the door. (John 10:7)

I am the bread of life. (John 6:35)

I am the good shepherd. (John 10:14)

I am the light of the world. (John 8:12)

I am the resurrection and the life. (John 11:25)

What those terms suggest to us is Jesus revealing himself to us, not as an object of worship, not as a cult figure, but as a teacher calling for our total reverence and love; as a guide calling for our total trust and abandonment; as a brother; as a friend: "I call you servants no longer but friends." One who we know loved his own in this world, one who is not a moralist but a liberator, a teacher of the Way, a guide, a door, the Way, with him in the spirit to the Father.

We most effectively mature our faith by prayer, by depth of prayer. Our prayer is always deepening and maturing. We move perhaps beyond certain types of prayer, not because they are bad, but because we simply grow into a deeper relationship with Christ. Maybe when we begin this relationship, we rely to a large extent upon

photographs, mental images of this person. But, as we mature ourselves, as we become more capable of human relationship, then this photograph, mental image of Christ, gives way, more and more, to the encounter with the real person. This encounter that occurs primarily at the level of our heart, our personal experience, then becomes wonderfully enriched in the Eucharist, in scripture, in community, all the other ways in which we also encounter this risen person of Jesus.

The Spirit is constantly at work in us, preparing us to see him, to see Jesus, more and more clearly. The starting point I think is to know that Jesus is finding us, the lost sheep. Jesus talks far more in the Gospels about God seeking us than about the human duty of seeking God. Our faith in Jesus is built on this confidence, that he dwells within us, seeking us in the sense that by seeking us he draws us away from our ego into our true self. That's the journey of Christian prayer: with Jesus, in the Spirit, to the Father.

What he teaches us on prayer in the Gospel of Matthew for example, the sermon on the mount, points us towards this experience of the indwelling presence within our own hearts: In interiority, in faith, in trust, in attention, "set your mind upon the kingdom", and in peace, beyond worry and anxiety. He teaches us the way of pure prayer. But above all, he teaches us to pray by praying with us and in us. Christ is at prayer in us. The mind of Christ, the human consciousness of Christ in us. So Christ is at prayer in us through a mysterious union, and he is the master of prayer. The prayer of Jesus, the incarnate Word, is *the* perfect prayer of the human being. No one could do it better, and therefore he is the one who teaches us to pray. He is the master of pure prayer. He meditates within us, realising his true self as the Son in union with the Father, just as we realise our true self. Prayer that is in the spirit, his prayer beyond thoughts and words, beyond the ego, his true self, one with the Father, and simultaneously one with us – that's the mystery of Christian prayer. Jesus, who is one with the Father, is present within each of us also, each of us uniquely and universally. To see him is to see the Father.

So the starting point of Christian prayer is that we enter into the prayer of Christ through our union with his human consciousness. And we must find our true self in order to find him. We must leave self behind in order to follow him.

This is from the Gospel of John again.

So the Word became flesh. He came to dwell among us and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. Out of his full store, we have all received grace upon grace; for while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God's only Son, he who is nearest to the Father's heart, he has made him known. (Jn. 1:14, 16-18)