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The Ego On Our Spiritual Journey II

LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

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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THE WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE, ST MARK'S, MYDDELTON SQUARE LONDON EC1R 1XX, UK
www.wccm.org

MEDIO MEDIA
(PUBLISHING ARM OF THE WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION)
www.mediomedia.org mmi@wccm.org

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Wholeness

I like to reflect with you on this way of pure prayer as a way of integration leading us to wholeness. Let's begin by listening to these words from the letter to the Ephesians:

So shall we all at last attain to the unity inherent in our faith and our knowledge of the Son of God—to mature manhood, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ? (Eph 4:13)

When we meditate day by day, we set out on a journey to the centre of our being, detaching ourselves from this false identification with the self. We begin to see the self as the inner light. But as we make that journey day by day, the morning and evening meditations for example, then a great deal of psychological material is thrown up.

It involves struggle with some dark forces, the shadow side of ourselves, those parts of ourselves that don't fit our public image or even our conscious image of ourselves. When this material does get thrown up, it's important that we allow it to be integrated, that we don't stop and start analysing it, at least not during the time of the meditation. In other words, we may be sitting down peacefully meditating, and then suddenly in the middle of the meditation, some memory from our childhood or some experience of our past, or some feeling associated with that comes back. It isn't always a definite imagined memory that comes back; it may be just the feelings associated with some major experience or trauma or problem of your past. That can suddenly flash into your consciousness and indeed into you, your body. It's released and it can be very powerful at times. And the great temptation, especially if it's an actual memory, will be to stop and to analyse it, remember it. We always enjoy activating our power of memory.

There, it's important to remember the discipline of the mantra, the discipline of the object of attention: To keep on this path of turning away from self, of taking the searchlight of our consciousness off our self, and keeping it trained directly into the mystery of God, not as an object, but *into* the mystery of God. So it's important that we be prepared in the work of integration, and the work of sanctification indeed, for these things to be turned up, but also important that we recognise the discipline of the prayer that tells us at the time of the prayer: Do not pay attention to what is happening. If it is something really important that has come up and that you will have to deal with, then you will have to deal with it in some way.

There's a well-accepted idea that the treasure of the true self, the treasure of the Kingdom, lies hidden at the bottom of a rubbish heap. The important thing is that we don't waste our time analysing the rubbish dump. There's always the danger of self-fascination, the danger of turning the contemplative journey into a journey of self-reflection, into a narcissistic journey. This doesn't mean that we are repressing the material again. The whole purpose of the work is to un-repress, to release. Whatever is in the dark, hidden, will be exposed to the light, Jesus tells us. That is part of the process of redemption, of liberation, of being set free. If the Son of Man sets you free, you will be free indeed. Today, anyway, we see this in terms of freedom from our own past, the past wounds, hurts, guilt, sins that hold us in their chains. The

great image of Jesus as the liberator. So the purpose of this inner work of prayer is to release us from these chains, not to repress them again. So there may well be the need to deal with this material or to talk through this material. And that will be different probably for different people. Almost certainly we will need others – director or teacher or friends, whatever it may be – to confide in and to help us through, to be able to let go of it.

The way to wholeness is through our brokenness. The way to integration is through our disintegration. The great symbol of this is the Eucharist. We break the bread at the Eucharist in order to create the unity of the Eucharist. The bread is broken that we may share in the one bread and become one with each other. The brokenness of Jesus is the healing, the making whole of the world. The wounds of Jesus in Christian iconography are always open. Even in Heaven, in the glorified body, the wounds of Jesus are open. I think we have to be careful when we talk about healing, the healing of memories or the healing of wounds is that it sometimes makes us feel that we've got rid of it entirely, and pushed it away. Often, the talk of healing can be a cover, a cover-up. We can be white-washing it or repressing it again. The wounds remain open, especially the formative wounds or experiences of our life. We don't cease to be the person we are; we don't change our personality entirely. We remain the person that we are. Psychologists tell us pretty convincingly that it's in the first four or five years that the basic shape of our psyche and personality has been already decided. So if we are to follow this way of integration, it means we have to accept that we go through our wounds, we will meet this shadow side with its painful consequences and maybe turbulent consequences.

That work of integration means the integration of body and mind, the integration of mind and spirit, the integration of our conscious and our unconscious selves, the integration of our public or outward social self and our inward self so that we do what we say, we feel what we do. That integration is built upon that understanding that there is an inherent unity, that the body and the mind are inherently one, that our whole being is inherently a unity. That's the affirmation of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection, that we are raised as a whole person despite our mortality, despite the fact that our bodies will return to dust and our minds, even, will return to some kind of psychological dust, but that nevertheless we are inherently one.

Therefore the work of integration is the work of affirming and realising that essential goodness. But it seems to be impossible to achieve without the experience of love. That seems to be the main message of Jesus: that unless we have awakened to the fact that we are loved unconditionally, then we don't have the confidence to set out with consciousness on this journey. We don't have enough sense of our own reality to risk ourselves in this work. If we don't have this experience of love, we don't have enough resources to withstand the work of integrating the shadow. It's here that we need the grounding experience of love, of acceptance. The kind of love we look for, for example, in community although within community, sometimes the wounds of our capacity or incapacity to be loved can sometimes be increased, rather than healed. Nevertheless, for the sake of our human development, we need that experience of acceptance and affirmation if we are to deal with the material that is raised up by this inner work.

Self-Knowledge

The work of holiness is achieved by the Holy Spirit, not by own efforts alone. This work of the Holy Spirit is expressed within our nature through this human process of self acceptance. If we were to say in the simplest terms what is the spiritual life, I think we couldn't probably say better than accepting ourselves as we are. Not even transcending ourselves or perfecting ourselves, but simply accepting ourselves. That is the spiritual life. Without that self-acceptance, we cannot come to self-knowledge. Whatever part of ourselves we don't accept, we repress. What is repressed is not available for the glorification of God. The glory of God is a man fully alive, fully self-accepting. We don't fulfil our destiny, which is to glorify God, unless we do this hard work of accepting every bit of ourselves, even the bits that don't seem to fit in, that don't fit in with our religious image, our monastic image or even our Christian image. Every part of self has to be included in the final oblation.

John Main described meditation very simply as the way in which we accept the gift of our own being. The way in which we accept the gift of our own being We have to feel that our being is a gift in order to be fully alive. This being that we have is not a burden we've been given, not a punishment, not a cross we have to carry, but a gift. Then we come to understand the great teaching of the Christian contemplative tradition, that the way to the knowledge of God is the way of self-knowledge, that we cannot know God without knowing ourselves. Therefore we cannot know God fully unless we know ourselves fully. "May I know myself that I may know thee," St Augustine said. "My me is God. Nor do I know myself except in God," said Catherine of Genoa.

And this is why our personal integration, the work we do with our shadow, with our past, also means our integration with God. Self-knowledge is inseparable from our knowledge of God. Our integration with ourselves is inseparable from our integration with God, because God is the basic relationship of our life, and indeed of all life. Life is essentially relationship, relationship with ourselves, with others, with the planet, the universe, with God.

Things have happened to separate us from our true self, to disrupt the relationship. These things, whatever they may be – we can call them sin – these things have locked us into an identification with our ego. If we are locked into the ego, then our understanding of ourself, our knowledge of self is very inadequate, very handicapped. We can never know God therefore, properly, if the knowledge of ourself is only our egotistical self-knowledge. Our image of ourself, our understanding of ourself that comes out of this identification with the ego, is not pleasant. It's there in that identification with the ego, that we are angry people, or vindictive people, fearful people, people who believe that they are of no real worth or value, unlovable. "If somebody really knew what I was like, they could never love me." There is the place of guilt and of self-hatred, of despair and chronic depression.

It is in prayer that we have the most wonderful gift available to us to break out of that identification with the ego, to break out of that hell, to break out of that half-life. As prayer re-centres us from the ego into our true self, our whole personality shifts. We become the person we are, or the person we are called to be. The true, the best parts of us, we say, come to the surface, and the others gradually diminish. We begin to feel and know that we are temples of God, that we are a child of God, that this is our basic relationship.

That involves a total surrender of ourselves to the basic relationship of our life, which is God. That is precisely what pure prayer is. As we leave every thought, every image, as we break or leave behind this centredness on our ego, we are making a total surrender of our whole self to God. We sometimes fear surrendering to God because we fear that God wants to take away what little happiness we have. And that's where we need encouragement to take the first step. Once we've taken the first step, we realise God doesn't want to take anything away from us. In fact, the closer we come to God, the happier, the more blessed we become.

All our other relationships relate to our relationship with God. The fruit of prayer is in our relationships with others. That's why it's so important we don't imagine that our relationship with God is a separate relationship. Because, then when our other human relationships go wrong, we say, Oh, never mind, I've got God. So I'll run over to God. That's the reflex of the ego. But our relationship with God is not over there, separate from all these people I live with or work with. Our relationship with God is the ground of every relationship we have. And therefore to attend to that basic relationship of our life with God, which is what we do in prayer, is at the same time to heal, to transform, to renew all our human relationships. We can only experience the meaning of forgiveness – the forgiveness of ourselves, the forgiveness of those who have hurt us, forgiveness of those who disappoint or betray us – we can only experience the real meaning of forgiveness, exemplified in Jesus on the cross, if we are in touch with that true self that we are.

With this re-centring of ourselves off the ego and into the true self, as we become one with the person we are, we begin to realise that we are whole. Not *only* broken but also we have this inherent unity. That we are unique and therefore have a unique value; we are loveable, and that the spirit that was in Jesus is in us. And we begin to find peace, freedom from fear, and a new kind of security. Even many of the little phobias that we have begin to diminish – the fear of the dark or the fear of spiders. Symptoms of deeper levels of fear within ourselves, the radical fear that we are isolated, separated, cut off, these symptoms disappear even if the diagnosis was never complete. In other words, we don't have to have analysed every single detail of the whole mess that we are in order to come to the liberation. Jesus never gave any indication that we had to go through major analysis. He simply said: Repent. Now I'm not saying that analysis, psychological help, may not be very useful and necessary at certain times in our life, but it isn't the essential journey. The essential journey begins with that step when we repent; in other words when we break the identification with the ego: I am not my ego.

There is a certain fear involved in this shift of the centre from the ego to the true self. Much feeling, many emotions, are unlocked. We have to deal with them, integrate them. But the key I think is to understand that the power that has locked us into this life-denying system of identification with the ego has to be simply de-powered, not overpowered. It's not the work of violence. The ego cannot transcend

the ego. It is love working through grace that leads us to that freedom and it de-powers the ego.

Listen to these words from the Philippians. It describes, I think, the social dimension, the communal dimension of this personal work of integration, of holiness.

If then our common life in Christ yields anything to stir the heart, any loving consolation, any sharing of the Spirit, any warmth of affection or compassion, fill up my cup of happiness by thinking and feeling alike, with the same love for one another, the same turn of mind, and a common care for unity. There must be no room for rivalry and personal vanity among you, but you must humbly reckon others better than yourselves. Look to each others' interest, and not merely to your own. Let your bearing towards one another rise out of your life in Christ Jesus. (Ph.2:1-5)

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Death and Resurrection

To find our life, we must lose it. That's the paradox that Jesus puts before us. To have life, to be alive, fully alive, we must learn to die, to die into life, like diving into the waves. We learn to die by unhooking ourselves from the compulsive, egotistically driven compulsion to be *doing* something, to be in control, to be producing, and so on.

The call to wholeness, the way of holiness, forces us, I think, into a personal encounter with the spiritual law of death and resurrection. We must lose ourself to find ourself, leave self behind in order to find ourself in God. This is a twin process, the dying and the rising. They occur simultaneously; we can't separate them. You may be more aware or feel one aspect of it more than at another time, but the uniting of this process in Christ, the dying and the rising of Christ, integrates these two forces. We are sharing in the sufferings of Christ so that we may also share in his resurrection.

Every meditation period is a death, a dying a little more to the ego, to our identification with the ego, and a rising a little more deeply to our oneness with our true self, with Christ. Every meditation period is a death because it focuses this multidimensional process at the centre of our being. We can die to our ego and the way we relate to each other in the refectory. We can die to each other in all the different ways in which we interact. But in our prayer these many different ways are unified. Remember what Cassian said about pure prayer, the way it concentrates and unifies us, the mantra expressing every thought and feeling of which we are capable. So it's in our prayer that this whole process of our life is focused right at the centre of our being. And it's in our prayer that we can give ourselves wholly to it, a living sacrifice, St Paul calls it: the worship offered by mind and heart. In our giving ourselves wholly to it, we make that great act of surrender, of leaving self behind, abandonment.

It's in this process of dying to our ego, that we discover wholeness and become holy. Holiness is not something that, as it were, we get to by leap-frogging over our difficulties and problems and personalities and egos, but holiness is the state or the result of reconciling the opposing forces within ourselves, reconciling the conflict that we have within our own hearts and minds and psyches, integrating the extremes. And that's the wisdom again of Benedict and of every great spiritual tradition with its emphasis upon moderation, the middle way, a way of balance. When we have found the centre, we have found the point of balance. We balance ourselves, we balance our life, we balance our appetites, we balance our emotional reactions to things. We become more integrated people, from the centre.

The real work of the spiritual life is to make this process of integration fully conscious. In our prayer, we co-operate with it. We align ourselves with that deep spiritual life that is always going on within us, whether we are conscious of it or not. We are being integrated, we are being put together, we are being built up. We should become fully conscious and aware of that. If we can look at it like that, and we have

an essentially contemplative view of ourselves and of the human journey, then I think it changes the way we evaluate ourselves, we judge ourselves.

If we see that this process is this fundamental life that is going on within us, God's life within us, then when we think of perfection, what do we think of? What is it to be perfect, to be "perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect"? I think if we evaluate perfection only in moral terms, then we fall short of the human mystery. Perfection in this life simply means being fully conscious, fully awake. We can never be perfect as God is perfect, in the sense of never having committed a fault. But the call of Jesus here is surely to become fully awake. So to be perfect is to be fully conscious.

This dying experience that meditation or prayer leads us into involve separation. This separation is an essential element of all death experience. It's an essential element therefore also of coming to wholeness. We begin this dying when we separate from our mother, separate from the womb, separate from the breast, when we separate emotionally from our mother, parents and family. Each of those is a death experience involving pain, and involving new life.

For the Christian, death is separation rather than annihilation. We believe in life after death. Keep death always before your eyes, St Benedict tells us. Keep this essential process of life constantly before your eyes. Don't forget why you are there; don't forget this is what is going on. This is what your prayer is focusing you in; this is the meaning of life. To be conscious of that, keeping it always before your eyes, always being conscious of this dying process, will vitalise you and keep you awake.

Embracing death, the death process each day in our prayer, focusing it in our prayer also prepares us for our final death, to meet death without fear. It does so because it reveals to us our true self. There is no separation from the true self. We are eternally who we are, the unique, loved creation of God. In our true self, there is no death. It is the meaning of Christ who has died and will not die again. He also went through this separation of the I, the ego, and has not died again, but dies with us as we go through our separation process.

Listen to these words from St Paul to the Corinthians:

Listen! I will unfold a mystery: we shall not all die, but we shall all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet call. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will rise immortal and we shall be changed. This perishable being must be clothed with the imperishable, and what is mortal must be clothed with immortality. And when our mortality has been clothed with immortality, then the saying of scripture will come true: 'Death is swallowed up; victory is won!' 'O Death where is your victory? O Death where is your sting.' The sting of death is sin, and sin gains its power from the law. But, God be praised, he gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, stand firm and immovable, and work for the Lord always, work without limit, since you know that in the Lord your labour cannot be lost.
(1 Cor.15:51-58)

The Journey of Meditation

The way of pure prayer is a journey centred in Christ, a Christo-centric journey. It is a journey that takes us deeper than the mind, deeper than thought, deeper than images. It is a journey to the heart, what the Eastern fathers called the bringing of the mind into the heart. But how can we best understand this journey, this process, this pilgrimage?

Let's listen to these words from the letter to the Colossians:

We ask God that you may receive from him all wisdom in spiritual understanding for full insight into his will so that your manner of life may be worthy of the Lord and entirely pleasing to him. We pray that you may bear fruit in active goodness of every kind and grow in the knowledge of God. (Col 1:10)

Growth and bearing fruit, processes of the spiritual life, the way of pure prayer, is best understood as an experience that unfolds. The Kingdom of heaven is not a place but an experience, one that is already deeply inserted into our being, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, one that we uncover, discover, recover.

There are different models which we can use to express this process, this journey. One I like very much refers to the way of meditation as a way of self-knowledge. This is the story of a man who carved a wonderful statue of an elephant and he put the elephant into the market place of his village. People from all over the country came to admire it. They filed past in great admiration of this beautiful elephant and then one person came up to the sculptor and he said: "How did you do this? This is a wonderful creation. How did you do it?" The sculptor thought for a moment and he said: "Well I started with this formless block of stone and I chipped away, and I chiselled, and I chipped away at everything that was not the elephant and the elephant emerged." Such is our way of coming to self-knowledge, the true self, taking away everything that is not the true self.

There's a scriptural description of our progress or growth which can be helpful as well. The progression, for example, that we see in the theology of St Paul from the charismatic gifts that he describes in the Corinthians I (the external manifestation, the phenomena, external experiences) to the harvest of the Spirit that he describes in Galatians 5 (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, understanding, self-control –the fruits of prayer); the gradual transforming of our negative feelings into positive feelings and responses, the way in which we feel, and others can see the holiness of Christ coming through our humanity, deeper than those initial charismatic gifts, more dramatic experiences or phenomena of first phases of our journey. But then moving even beyond the fruits of the Spirit, perhaps the highest development of this journey is our real entry into the experience of the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" and so on. Those Beatitudes express the heart of the paradox of Christ, the paradox of reality seen from the centre of reality. So we could see our progress in this way, as well, from the external experiences to the transformation of our personality by the holiness of Christ within us, to the living out the Beatitudes, the paradox of reality.

What is clear, whatever model we take for this journey, is growth. There is a crisis at every stage of growth. Anyone persevering in any journey experiences at every stage of our growth a crisis of some kind. There is always the same struggle to detach from the ego at a deeper and deeper level, in which we overcome at a deeper and deeper level the buried fears and insecurities of our psyche.

In the Buddhist tradition I came across once a rather nice description of the progress of the meditator, of the monk. It uses the image of a river. The first stage is when we enter the river. It's called the stream enterer. The idea is that you just put your foot in for a couple of minutes and then jump out again. You're just a taster. The next time you get in, you stay longer. This is called the once-returner. You may get out again but only once more, and then you are back and you stay in. Thirdly, the never-returner, one who stays in the stream, stays in this flow, in this river. And finally the saint or the enlightened person, free person. These are the stages of commitment by which we can recognise our progress, our movement, the stages of commitment that become very evident in the way that we remain faithful to a discipline of prayer. For example, when we are starting a particular practice like meditation, we start, we stop, we start again. We are on and off perhaps. We go through a process of deepening commitment. The actual moment of commitment may be quite imperceptible. We suddenly realise one day we are a never-returner, we have passed the point of no return and we are not going to turn back. That moment of commitment seems rather difficult to find. We certainly sense I think it wasn't just an act of the will. Our will is rarely strong enough to achieve that. So we are aware, I think, as we go through this process of commitment, that the very process of commitment is also filled with grace, Christ as our teacher is there within our learning, within our discipleship.

St. Theresa spoke about certain stages of prayer graphically as like the stages in which you get water. She said the first stage is like using a bucket, a rather laborious job, getting the bucket from the well and carrying it. The second stage is using a pump, more easy. The third stage is when you have irrigation. You don't have to carry the water at all. And the fourth stage is when it rains. It describes the stages of prayer, the stages of our entry indeed into the prayer of the Spirit. What characterises those stages of prayer is a decreasing degree of effort, less and less effort, more and more the prayer of Christ.

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The Stages of our Journey

I'd like to look at the stages that everyone tends to go through as they begin an inner journey such as the way of pure prayer that Cassian describes, of Christian meditation that John Main describes.

Very often when one begins the first stage is like hearing the Word and it strikes home. We feel the first fervour of conversion. There's a sense of recognition, something intuitive in us responds to this. There's an awakening and an enthusiasm, and insight into the meaning of all these terms: poverty, simplicity, stillness, silence. All these words have an attractive meaning that fills us with peace, with an energy of peace, that gives us the motivating power to commit ourselves to it. With this first stage comes the capacity for solitude, the happiness to be with oneself. It is easy to be with oneself when one isn't looking for restless distractions, when one isn't looking for gossip, when one isn't looking for things to fill up our time and our minds. And we're also ready for discipline. The discipline doesn't seem too great; two half-hours a day is simple.

But from this first stage, we move inevitably I think into a second stage, in which we feel a gradual, maybe even a sudden waning of that enthusiasm, of that first fervour. That great moment of awakening and insight begins to fade or disappear. We begin to sense much more effort is needed to maintain the momentum. At this stage the discipline begins to be a little problematical. It is much more tempting to miss one or two meditations because it is a little difficult now. We don't have that same enthusiasm. It is at this stage too, we begin to desire more experience. We want something more to happen. This poverty thing, this emptiness thing, seems a bit empty and we would like something to happen. At this second stage, we may well rediscover, at a deeper and simpler level of ourselves, an enthusiasm again. We suddenly get an insight that this is a journey, that we have to go through these changes of mood.

But then a third stage can unfold, what the Desert Fathers called *acedia*, the night of sense, a feeling of real emotional dryness. And with that feeling of no irrigation, just very dry in our prayer, often comes anger. With that *acedia* comes often a sense of impatience, irritability, the beginning perhaps of the release of suppressed anger within us psychologically. At this point we begin to get restless, looking around for quicker methods, easier methods, short cuts. At this point we may well break the discipline of the daily meditation periods altogether because we sense no progress. And again, as we go through this *acedia*, we may well come out into a renewed sense of commitment. You may give up for a while and then feel something is missing. You think: Whatever it is I was doing couldn't be all wrong because I feel now I am lacking something that I had before. So we start again. And within all these stopping and starting there is a sense of being led, a sense of taking up the scent of the Spirit.

But we may well then find ourselves in a period of turbulence, real turbulence. Some of the progress we seemed to have made is lost. Things that we thought that we had transcended come back to haunt us. We get perhaps a new wave of really negative

feelings again. The shadow side of us that is usually behind us sometimes gets cast in front of us. We have to face our own shadow, and that can be very difficult for ourselves and sometimes for the people we live with. There is an impulse here to run altogether. It is here that most of all we need the help of others. We need the support and encouragement of others to remain clearly on this journey. That's the wonder of a community. It would be no good if in a community, everybody was at the same stage at the same time. If everyone was in *acedia* at the same time it would be pretty awful. Fortunately somebody just recovers their first fervour of conversion as we are going into our *acedia*. So somehow or other we push and pull each other through.

According to the Desert tradition, the child of *acedia* is *apatheia* and *agape*. If we go through the *acedia*, we come into *apatheia* – peace, calmness, equanimity. Not the suppression or loss of feeling, not that we become unfeeling or emotionally dead, but that our feelings perhaps are sharper and clearer and more colourful than they were before, are now held in a balance, integrated. From that *apatheia* comes the child of *agape*, of love, selfless love. It is in this *apatheia* or this peace of the soul that we begin to see the integration of extremes within ourselves. That is the process of becoming whole. Not that we cut off the extremes because they bother us, but that we integrate them. And the greater the extremes we can integrate, the more whole, more holy we are. With that integration of extremes comes balance and moderation. As you integrate the extremes, you find a deeper centre and this spirit of moderation gives depth and rootedness.

We find at this stage that even the motivation, even our motives for following this way of pure prayer, are becoming changed. Our initial motives are rather egotistical. These are all the things I want for myself. As we are led by the Spirit deeper into the process of growth, our motives for pursuing the journey become less egotistical. We begin perhaps then to understand that it is in praying that we become the person that God is calling us to be. It is in prayer that we fulfil our destiny: that we are what God wants us to be; we are doing what God wants us to do, which is in our prayer simply to glorify him, the purpose of all creation, by reflecting back to God his own glory.

There's finally one other way, a very simple and practical way that we might think of the journey of pure prayer. That is simply the way in which we say the word, in which we recite the mantra. The purpose of the mantra as we know now is to take our minds off ourselves, to bring your mind to stillness and to lead us through our distractions. It is in saying the word that the word becomes rooted in our hearts in the way that Cassian in the tradition of the Jesus Prayer described that it becomes rooted in us: praying in us at all times and linking all the different levels of our consciousness, even our body, to the prayer of the Spirit within us.

There is a process in saying the mantra. Not really a linear progress but it helps to think about the stages in which the mantra becomes rooted. The first step, for example, is when we are simply saying the mantra but we are getting constantly interrupted by our distractions. We say it maybe just for a few seconds before we go off in another tangent.

Then gradually as we are humble enough (it's a very humbling work) to persevere, to keep coming back to the mantra, it is then as if we begin to say it for longer, slightly longer periods of attention without distraction. The distractions are still there but they no longer interrupt us in saying the mantra. At this stage it's as if we are sounding the mantra. Less effort is needed to say it; there's still some, it's

always an act of faith, but less self-conscious, becoming a little more rooted.

Then thirdly we grow into a stage where we say the mantra for periods of time without distractions. At this stage we are listening to the word.

Saying it, sounding it, listening to it; interrupted by distractions, uninterrupted by distractions, without distractions – these are stages that can repeat themselves over and over again, however long one is making the journey.

It is not ultimately by any external sign of course that we can measure our progress, because there is no measuring to do. Those are simple stages that we would recognise as signs of the process at work. I think it is the parables of the Kingdom – the treasure buried in the field, the seed planted in the ground that germinates we know not how, the pearl of great price for which we will sell everything – that bring us deep insight into what is happening in us as we persevere on the journey.

It is a journey into God, and therefore a journey that becomes less and less measurable. Finding God, St Gregory of Nyssa says, consists in endlessly seeking him. Our life is an endless following of the Word.

