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KIM NATARAJA

THE *Transformative*
Experience OF MEDITATION



“If we are changed by interaction with others on the surface level of our being, how much more will we be changed in the silence of meditation, when we enter the sphere of influence of our true self in Christ.” Kim explains that in leaving thoughts behind and paying attention to the word we transcend the ego to put our mind on the Presence of God. It is a communion in love in the depth of our being, and it changes us in a profound way.

All we need to do is to be faithful to the daily practice and open to love, and to allow the Spirit of the Risen Christ to do its work of transformation.

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OF MEDITATION

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Changes in the Silence of Meditation

T S Eliot points out the essence of prayer, pure prayer:

You are not here to verify,
 Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity, or carry report.
 You are here to kneel, where prayer has been valid.
 And prayer is more than an order of words,
 the conscious occupation of the praying mind,
 or the sound of the voice praying. (T S Eliot)

The prayer we were taught in Church, and still are on the whole, is mostly restricted to vocal prayer, prayer of the mind – we repeat set prayers, we praise God, give Him thanks, and we intercede for others. All very laudable, but we stay on the level of the mind. Meditation seems so straightforward: “Just repeat your word.” But when we faithfully do repeat our prayer word, our mantra, soon there comes a moment when we leave the surface of this mental prayer and slide into a deeper way of prayer, a profound, focused prayer of the heart; no longer do we pray with the mind, but we pray with the heart: we are no longer talking to God, but are in the presence of God in a self-forgetting way. Some people intuitively feel that this is so and are precisely for this reason attracted to meditation; they’re pulled by a longing to draw closer to God. Even in our ordinary way of prayer we can spontaneously reach that deeper level. That is “pure” prayer as the Early Christians called it – the essence of prayer.

This “pure” prayer is very potent. We have forgotten in our scientific age how powerful prayer can be. There is no way you can seriously meditate, pray with all your heart, and not be gradually changed. The essence of this way of prayer is attention, and in its

train follows awareness. And that awareness is the key that leads to change. The degree of change of course depends on the level of your commitment to this important discipline, but change you will!

But we are not too sure that we like the idea of change: Why do I have to change? I am all right as I am, thank you very much. But who is speaking here? May I introduce you to your “ego”? Now, I don’t use the term ego in our usual negative way, meaning being self-centred, self-willed, and opinionated. I use it in the Jungian sense, the surface aspect of our being, our conscious centre, mainly interested in keeping us alive. It is our survival expert. This is the ego that does not like change. It does not want to change its survival tactics; after all it has spent the whole of our childhood perfecting this to keep us secure and safe.

The ego sees going into the silence of deep prayer as threatening to its own existence. We are after all leaving words and images behind that have shaped our surface being; we are in fact leaving the ego’s sphere of influence. The ego then tries to keep us under its control by instilling fear of change, fear of the unknown. It even will make us think that change is *not* possible, by convincing us that our present attitude or opinion is right. It will resist change with all its might. Yet in this uncertain life the only thing we can depend on is that everything does change. We know from personal experience that our bodies change over time, whether we like it or not. Even I no longer look or feel as I did when I was nineteen!

Recently, I read an interesting article in the *Scientific American*, which described how open to change even our brain is. An experiment showed how the brain of each person engaged in an intent conversation is changed. This does not only prove how open to change we are in all our aspects, but it also has important implications for us in how we interact with one another. I spent my life in education, and it is well known that the expectation of the teacher affects the performance of the student. The German poet and dramatist Goethe said at the end of the 18th century already: “If you treat a person as she appears to be, you make her worse

than she is. But if you treat a person as if she were already what she potentially could be, you make her what she should be.” Our attitude and pre-judgments will affect and change how other people think about themselves, and in turn it will affect how others see us and we see ourselves. Another experiment proved that when people sit and meditate in a group, although their brain wave patterns are quite different at the start, after ten minutes or so their brain wave patterns start to resemble one another, calm waves dominating. A scientific proof of how we support one another in a meditation group!

If we are changed by interaction with others on the surface level of our being, how much more will we be changed in the silence of meditation, when we enter the sphere of influence of our “true self in Christ”. It is this communion in love in the depth of our being that affects and changes our personality in a profound way. All we need to do is pay attention to our word, be not afraid, but open to change, open to love and to allow the Spirit of the Risen Christ to do its work of transformation.

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## *Health Benefits of Meditation*

Because of its stress-reducing properties, meditation has caught the public’s imagination. There have been many research papers, magazine articles, books, television documentaries proving the beneficial impact of meditation on health. The essence of meditation is attention. Paying attention will lead inevitably to change. This effect is first and foremost felt in our body. Every part of the whole body is integrally linked with the brain through the nervous system. A change in the brain inevitably means changes in the body.

My daughter Shanida, a neuroscientist, explains in her book *The Blissful Brain* what happens in the brain when we pay one-pointed attention to our mantra. Apparently, one group of cells in the front part of our brain, the pre-frontal cortex, is involved with thoughts, images and daydreams. Another group of cells is involved with attention. By focusing our mind in one-pointed attention on our mantra, we encourage more activity in these attention cells. As our focus deepens, the activity in the cells involved in thoughts and images gets considerably less. Scientific experiments have proved this by showing a decrease in the beta waves, our thinking waves – the ego part of our consciousness. It is interesting to see how our ego consciousness, with its survival needs in this material plane, is encoded in the circuitry of our brain, but can be temporarily bypassed.

In leaving thoughts behind, we are transcending the ego. The initiative for these changes stems from our paying attention to our word and our conscious intention to put our mind on the Kingdom, the Presence of God. We have in fact temporarily switched from the left brain, the logical thinking ego part of our consciousness,

to the right brain, the more creative holistic way of tuning into reality. And there we can touch the presence of our *true self*. We have in fact followed Jesus' teaching:

If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind.... if a man will let himself be lost for my sake, he will find his true self.

But there is more. Prolonged one-pointed attention also has a chain reaction effect on other cells in the brain, particularly the limbic system, as it is called, the region dealing with emotional response. The emotion of fear, which is expressed in the strong "flight or fight" response, is temporarily switched off and changes to one of acceptance, relaxation and tranquillity. We call that the "relaxation response". So we move from "flight or fight" to the relaxation response. We again can prove this by showing that there are more *alpha* and *theta* waves. One thing we must not forget is that the brain is integrally linked with every part of the whole body through the nervous system. A change in the brain inevitably means changes in the body.

As we are no longer distracted by the whole army of thoughts, this attitude of attention awakens awareness. We are awake and alert and notice the areas of tension in the body and can consciously support the relaxation process that is happening already. We do this also by the position we assume during meditation. It doesn't really matter whether we sit on a chair or in the full lotus position, as long as it allows us to hold our back straight and relaxed for the full duration of the meditation. An additional benefit of this is that in this way our chest will be open, allowing the breath to flow unrestrictedly. We may even have helped this process of relaxation by preparing ourselves with physical exercises designed to harmonize the body, such as yoga, tai chi and chi kung. As our body relaxes so does the breath, and that in turn supports the relaxation of our mind.

The reduction of tension in the body has important consequences for our health. Stress, the bane of modern life, gets

stored in our body as tension. It's because of its stress-reducing properties that meditation has caught the public's imagination. For instance, it decreases the risk of cardiovascular disease and blood pressure. It also confers psychological benefits, such as reducing anxiety and depression; it helps us with coping both with disease and chronic pain, and even addresses addictive behaviour, which is especially, in part, a manifestation of stress. These are no doubt worthwhile effects of meditation.

But for those of us, who see meditation as a spiritual practice, this is only the first step. We certainly appreciate these changes, but we do not see them as the aim of our discipline. For us, meditation is a discipline of prayer, a way of practising the presence of God. Health benefits are welcome but as side-effects. The essence of meditation is attention and in its train follows awareness, and that awareness is the key that leads to change. The sharpening of awareness – and that is the crux – will lead not only to physical changes but to other changes as well. There will be changes on the mental and psychological plane which affect our sense of identity. These will eventually transform us into the person God intends us to be.

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## *Beyond Words and Images*

The moment we sit down to meditate and try to focus on our mantra, thoughts come crowding in. The problem is when we have stilled our body, our thoughts do the walking. We wander about in daydreams, down memory lane, planning, hoping, worrying; internally we are still filled with perpetual noise and movement, the mad whirl of disconnected thoughts. John Main called these thoughts “the chaotic din of a mind ravaged by so much exposure to trivia and distraction”. Ramakrishna compared the mind to a tree full of chattering monkeys, jumping from branch to branch.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers stress the inevitability of thoughts:

A brother came to Abba Pastor and said: ‘Many distracting thoughts come into my mind, and I am in danger because of them. Then the elder thrust him out in the open air and said: ‘Open up the garments about your chest and catch the wind in them.’ But he replied: ‘This I cannot do.’ So the elder said to him: ‘If you cannot catch the wind, neither can you prevent distracting thoughts from coming into your head.’

It’s quite embarrassing to realize how superficial most of our thoughts are. Soon we start to feel discouraged and think that perhaps we are not meant to be doing this. But persevere! Just focus on the mantra with full attention and accept what happens. Our thoughts, however chaotic they are, also have a right to be there. Acceptance is the key. Jung said: “Wisdom begins when we take things as they are; otherwise we get nowhere.”

But we are so used to criticizing and judging ourselves, that we get irritated when we sit down to meditate and the thoughts just crowd in. But the more we get irritated with ourselves, the

more we try to suppress our thoughts, the more persistent they become. Instead of unifying our mind we are dividing it: one part of our mind fights another.

Our ego, considers our thoughts and images to be essential to our sense of identity. As long as we are thinking, we think we know who we are and we feel we have a degree of control over what happens; we feel in charge and therefore secure. We have been brought up in a worldview, in which thought is considered to be the highest activity we can engage in. Descartes in his statement “*I think, therefore I am*” actually went as far as linking existence with thought. Not thinking feels like not being, a threat to our survival.

It is so difficult to leave thoughts behind, isn’t it, to let go of all our thoughts and images. But as we accept our thoughts as a natural part of ourselves, we will find that they get quieter. Our thoughts, images and feelings are only a problem if we get hooked by them, if we get tempted to follow their lead. But we have a choice: we can either tag along with our thoughts or focus on our mantra. It is a free choice. Sometimes naming them – thoughts, just thoughts – when they interrupt our meditation, helps us to stay detached from them. Slowly, they get quieter, less demanding; they really become like the background music in the supermarket – you hear it, but are not really aware of it. We switch our attention and become aware of the gaps between the thoughts; eventually the gaps get wider and slowly the mantra reigns supreme in the gaps, the door to silence.

When we are meditating, we gently watch our thoughts passing by without attaching any significance to them. I remember years ago an advertisement for meditation. On a poster there was an Indian Guru, in typical attire and appearance, balanced perfectly on a surfboard, riding the waves. Underneath was the phrase: “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.” In meditation our surfboard is the mantra, and our thoughts the waves.

At times we will be able to ride them skilfully; at other times

the thoughts like the waves calm down, the sea is smooth and calm and we lie peacefully on our surfboard, our mantra, and our mind is still and calm. At other times there are so many thoughts whirring around that we can't even pick up the mantra. The sea seems too rough to surf. But just accept that that is the way you are today. Yet sometimes even after such a meditation filled with thoughts we feel nevertheless peaceful. The surface of our mind and the sea can be rough, but in the depth, there still is that everlasting peace.

In meditation, we let go of thought and images, in fact all the operations of the rational mind, the ego – thinking, memory and imagination. We do need the ego in ordinary reality to help us survive, but in meditation we don't need its supervision; we have to be brave and temporarily let go of all our thoughts and images. In leaving behind all our thoughts and images, we are transcending the ego. Thoughts are impermanent, changeable. They are a result of limited subjective perception, an emotionally coloured partial view of one level of reality, the material one.

The true nature of our mind is silence. Meister Eckhart said: "Nothing describes God as well as Silence." In our essence we are "children of God", children of eternal silence. Meditation helps us to discover who we truly are, beyond the limited picture of our surface being, beyond the ego.

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The Healing of the Wounded Ego

When we are meditating, we gently watch our thoughts passing by without attaching any significance to them. As we accept our thoughts as a natural part of ourselves, we will find that they get quieter. Just focus on the mantra with full attention and accept what happens. Once we have quietened our thoughts, we enter through the doors of silence into peace and tranquillity. We get strengthened and refreshed by the silence. This is not the end of our journey, only a temporary pit-stop. What happens sooner or later is that deeper thoughts enter our consciousness. Jung called this our "personal unconscious", our "shadow". John Main called this "the darker level of consciousness of repressed fears and anxieties".

For our ego to become whole and no longer form a barrier on the spiritual path, we have to descend into the *personal unconscious* and face these forgotten aspects of our being. We need to do that with courage, without judging or criticising. Although Jung called these forgotten aspects the "shadow", it does not mean these are all bad aspects that deserved being repressed. On the whole, they are just aspects of our personality our environment did not approve of, or wounds inflicted on our sense of identity. For women, it can be assertiveness or the expression of anger that was frowned upon. For men, it can be showing emotions, crying, that was not accepted. But as adults, we do need to be able to assert ourselves or verbalize righteous anger, to be in touch with our emotions and express them appropriately. Jung said that the "shadow" is ninety per cent gold. What was rejected are on the whole valuable aspects of our human nature. But we need to face these aspects and acknowledge their right to be there. If we don't

they will be the unconscious drives behind our present behaviour. They will be the snake in the following poem threatening us:

On a lotus leaf sits a frog, legs crossed, hands folded,
back straight, motionless, deep in meditation.
Behind him rears up a huge snake.
Does he know? Does he not know?
Watch out!

All we need to do and can do is let these thoughts enter our awareness. Just acknowledging their existence is enough to bring about change. We don't consciously try to change our attitude, we just open ourselves to possibilities, and change happens gradually and unconsciously, with the help of the Spirit.

The thoughts that emerge out of this level of consciousness are important, as they have shaped our sense of identity, our self-images. We are born as fragile human beings with certain inbuilt needs to secure our survival: security, love, esteem, power, control, and pleasure. Initially we cannot meet these needs ourselves; we depend on others to do so and unfortunately they are not always able to do so; or we as children interpreted their actions in a negative way. The result: we may feel unloved or even unlovable, insecure, worthless, powerless, not in control.

To try to remedy this we adopt as children the images others have of us, good as well as destructive ones. We behave in ways that will earn approval and acceptance, hoping to fit in, to be secure. Even after childhood, when we can survive on our own, we still own these images, even distorted ones, as they continue to give us a sense of identity: we *think* we know who we are, however far from the truth that may be. But we are a lot more than our environment has taught us. The trouble is that these *false* images can be so destructive and a real barrier to our growth; they can in fact block the access to the *self*.

If our "love" need was not met or we have only experienced conditional love – love as a reward for good behaviour – it may be hard for us to imagine that God, who is Unconditional Love, is also

there for us. Meditation is based on a loving relationship of faith and trust in the Divine. Our sense of unworthiness might make entering into that relationship initially very challenging.

If our "security" need has not been met, this may well lead to an urge to stay in control. The "letting go" that meditation requires may be therefore at first incredibly threatening.

If a need for "esteem" is our driving force, which makes us put excessive emphasis on approval, status and reputation, then to consider doing something "unorthodox", such as meditation, may not fit the real need to be accepted and respected by our immediate circle of friends and family.

If we did not feel "valued", if the pattern of our early life was marked by being ignored, by our opinions not asked for or taken on board, then to trust in our own inner voice, our own opinion, could be a problem at first.

It needs trust and perseverance to build up this confidence. Our images of ourselves can be a serious block on the path of meditation. All these emotions are based on our conditioned attitudes formed in the past. These are wounds of the ego. Scars of these wounds will always be with us, but they do not need to influence our behaviour any more. That was then; this is *now*! By our focusing on our mantra, meditation teaches us to stay in the present moment, to be aware, to become conscious of who we truly are – children of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit. We have to leave the prison of the wounded ego. We already are a beloved "child of God". There is nothing to earn, nothing to achieve.

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## *The Healing of Suppressed Emotions*

When we enter the forest of the personal unconscious in the silence of meditation, we meet both the beauty and the beast: both forgotten memories of beautiful moments and painful ones. The emotions linked to this repressed material rise to the surface too: joy bubbles up, peace reigns, tears flow unexpectedly, feelings of anger and irritation come to the fore. These suppressed emotions are kept locked in our body. But this suppression requires an enormous amount of energy, causing tension and even illness, as they form an obstruction to the general natural flow of energy.

Therefore, just the release of this buried energy is very healing. We need to acknowledge that these are the tears we did not cry when we were hurt; this is the anger and irritation we felt at a time when we could not express them. We need to allow them to come to the surface, be released, and thus be healed. In the silence, we enter the sphere of Christ the healer, the supreme psychotherapist! There is not always the need to know the causes of these emotions. Being conscious of your emotions often prevents you from having to act them out or repress them. If we don't become aware, these unconscious emotions are just waiting for the appropriate stimulus to manifest themselves in often unexpected and exaggerated ways. One of the indications we have, that a buried memory, a pattern, is influencing us, is an over-reaction. Take the example of someone slighting us, making us feel unappreciated. If we feel terribly hurt by this, it may well have been a pattern of our early life: ignored, not valued, opinion not asked for or taken on board.

By being aware of this wound, we may be able to relativize

the actual occurrence. Becoming aware of our emotions, sensations, and the reactions associated with them as they arise grows with meditation. All we need to do is pay attention to our prayer-word and our awareness will grow. The essence of this way of prayer is attention, and in its train follows awareness, and that awareness is the key that leads to change. The beauty of meditation as a transformative experience is that we do not actually have to do this work on our own. We are made aware of these deep-seated reactions to life and other people when we enter the silence. It is the grace of the Spirit of Christ that gives the insights and brings certain aspects to our attention. It is not our own will and effort. Our task is to be open, to be mindful, of what we are doing and why. We won't get rid of our conditioning, but once we recognize our unconscious drives and have named them, they lose their hold over us, as we hear in the story of John:

You are at a party and John, a good friend of yours, walks into the room. You are about to hail him, but he totally ignores you, walks straight past you. You are very taken aback. "What is the matter with him?" Soon after that the thought occurs: "What have I done now? Well, if he wants to be like that, that is his affair! Why should I care?" A little later, comes the giggling thought: "Well, it is not really surprising is it? People never really like me, once they know me better. I may as well go home now." And off you go, playing your emotional tape of being basically unlovable and always rejected. And you lose a friend.

Now consider the same scene without the unconscious pushing of emotional buttons:

Again, you are at a party and John, a good friend of yours, walks into the room, but totally ignores you, walking straight past you. Your reaction: "Oh dear, what is the matter with John? He doesn't seem to be himself at all. I wonder, what



has happened?” So you go up to John and say: “Hi John! Are you all right?” and he answers: “Oh, no I am not. You know, that beautiful Ferrari I bought a week ago? Someone stole it! And I had not insured it yet! Can you believe that?” You commiserate, cementing your friendship.

The second version is the result of the process of integrating unconscious elements into our conscious being. We become aware, and therefore free of these compulsive attitudes. Jung called this important development “individuation”. We realize at a profound level that there is more to us than the ego. In meditation we experience that when we let go of the ego there is a deeper, clear awareness, we call the self. We instinctively feel that this is our home, our origin.

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The Teaching of the Desert Hermits

Not only do we get our way of silent prayer from the Christian Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th century, but we also get very clear advice how to deal with the wounded ego. The Desert hermits were taught to acknowledge and then let go of all socially-conditioned false images of themselves; that was the road to “purity of heart”, which led to awareness of their *own true self, in Christ*.

The most important Desert Father in this respect is Evagrius. Evagrius advised monks to watch their thoughts, be aware of their unconscious drives, their compulsive behaviour that is an outcome of their unmet survival needs, their wounds.

He focused on the resulting drives of these unmet needs: namely greed, impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride. He called these “evil thoughts”, as he saw them as thoughts fuelled by strong misdirected emotion, which needed to be understood, controlled and purified.

“Greed” is seen as an over-indulgence in the senses in general, so it applies to food, drink, possessions and sex. Hence “impurity”. That in turn leads to “avarice” – you want to keep what you have. Or to “sadness” – you do not have everything you would like. Then “anger” and “envy” arise towards those who have what you lack, or who try to take away from you what you do have. When no growth seems to happen, there arises the feeling of boredom (acedia), meaninglessness, the feeling of “what’s the point?” But even when we have grown spiritually there are still the temptations of “vainglory” and “pride” waiting for us – the ego hijacking any growth on the spiritual path. The ego wants to claim all the credit for it – not seeing the talents we have received as a gift from the Divine.

Illusion and Reality

The link with the survival needs we have been exploring is very clear. The normal, ordinary acceptable need to have sufficient for survival becomes an overwhelming drive – greed for things and people to possess, which will give us the illusionary sense of love, pleasure, security, esteem, power and control. Through greed, pride, and envy, the ego hijacks our whole being into self-centredness. We can see these demons rampant not only in our own time, but also in our own life.

Evagrius taught that these evil thoughts, “the seven deadly sins”, could be purified. The teaching of the Desert saw Creation as a manifestation of God. Evagrius taught that: “For those who are far from God ... God has made it possible for them to come near to the knowledge of him and his love for them through the medium of creatures.” We were seen as only flawed by the wiles of our ego, but purification and prayer could restore us to our essential goodness, with the help of grace, as “Men and women are created in the “image of God”, and our human vocation is to manifest “likeness to God” through our manner of life”. (Origen)

John Main regretted that modern men and women “have lost the support of a common faith in their essential goodness, reasonableness and inner integrity”. He therefore not only restored to us a way of prayer of the Early Christians but also their belief in our essential goodness. He strongly felt that through meditation we would again become aware of “the potential of the human spirit rather than the limitations of human life”. He saw meditation as a process of liberation, setting these truths free in our lives.

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The world of our ego is not real; it changes with every new emotion or thought. It is all a question of perception. Just notice how different the world looks when you are happy or when you are down. You can walk through a street filled with cherry blossoms, when depressed and not notice their beauty at all! It’s all a question of perception. We see what fits in with our ideas:

To her lover, a beautiful woman is a delight; to an ascetic, a distraction; to a wolf, a good meal. (Zen tradition)

We identify with whatever image seems appropriate at a time and whichever role we are fulfilling at that moment. Our surface being has no lasting reality. Everything is fleeting and changeable. John Main said: “Ego is essentially the image we have of ourselves, the image of ourselves that we try to project. All illusion, all false perceptions of ourselves and others and God are the offspring of the ego.” That is why John Main talked about the world of the ego as the world of “illusion” and pointed to meditation as a way of *breaking through from a world of illusion into the pure light of reality*.

But we balk at the word “illusion”! We immediately think: “This world may be an illusion, but it feels very real to me!” When someone gets up in the morning with arthritic joints, hardly able to move without pain, saying “the world is an illusion” is not very helpful. But that is taking this concept literally. Of course the world we live in is real; if nothing else it would be incredibly disrespectful to deny all the suffering and pain. But still it is only our *partial* view on reality.

But the real meaning of “illusion” John Main refers to is our

taking this reality for the *only* reality, being ignorant of the Higher Reality, in which this one is embedded. Meditation helps us to experience the truth of this higher reality. These levels of reality are not separate, but the ordinary reality is interpenetrated with the Divine:

Split the wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there. (Gospel of Thomas, Saying 77)

John Main did not mean in saying the world is an illusion that this world is of no importance – a world-denying attitude to life – as this would deny the importance and reality of the Incarnation. Jesus shared our humanity, our joys and suffering. It is a reality that has value in its own right. But it is not the *only* reality, and that is one of the most important truths we will discover through meditation.

Attention allows us to switch off the world of duality our ego has created and helps us to experience our original way of being, our unity consciousness.

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Images of God

Our spiritual growth is marked by and reflected in our changing images of God.

Our images of God are often an inherited product of our early childhood linked to our attitudes especially to parents and teachers. God the Father may throw up quite a barrier, if our own father was absent, highly critical, impatient or abusive. This image will not give us the trust needed to let go and enter the silence. Not only will God seem someone to be feared and avoided, but also our self-image will be as one totally unworthy of God's attention. The image of God as Mother, a powerful archetype, may appeal to some, but for others can throw up similar resistances. If your image is one of God as Judge, how comfortable would you be entering His presence? He becomes someone to avoid rather than relate to, as so many of us carry such a burden of perceived guilt. So why would we want to go into the silence to be in His Presence? Why would we want to put ourselves in a position where we could be judged and rejected?

But they are only images, not the reality. Genesis tells us that we have been made "in the image and likeness of God". But rather than understanding this as our having the Divine image and likeness within us, we take this literally and consequently we make God in turn in our own conditioned image and likeness. The early Church Father Clement of Alexandria said scathingly in the 2nd century:

Most people are enclosed in their mortal bodies like a snail in its shell, curled up in their obsessions after the manner of hedgehogs. They form their notion of God's blessedness by taking themselves for a model.

The early Church considered using a name for God blasphemous, as any name or image would belittle and limit God. Clement of Alexandria again said:

The notion of pure being is the closest you can come to God... He is ineffable, beyond all speech, beyond every concept, beyond every thought.

But even if we know that we cannot encompass the Divine in words and thoughts, we still find it too difficult on the whole to relate to something “unnameable, ineffable, and unlimited”. The human brain primarily operates through images. That is how it is made, and that is all right as long as we remember that God is much more than our images, and look beyond the images to the Reality they point to. As a Buddhist saying emphasizes, they are “fingers pointing at the moon, not the moon itself”.

When we turn “agnostic” or even “atheist”, often in reaction to our early religious upbringing, it is our image of God that has died. Nietzsche’s cry “God is dead” is a striking example of that. He no longer could accept the God of his childhood and threw out the baby with the bathwater. But Laurence Freeman stresses that “to ignore Jesus because of the imperfections of the churches is a foolishness of tragic dimension....” and you could add to that also because of the imperfection of our images.

We tend to treat the image as the Reality, ignoring that they are merely shadows of the real. We in fact make idols out of our images. But we need to smash these idols. Meister Eckhart, a 14th century German mystic, put this very forcefully in his saying: “Therefore I pray to God to rid me of god.” My images of God, he meant. This saying is very similar to the Buddhist saying: “When you meet the Buddha on the road kill him.” John Cassian relates the story in his *Conferences* of a desert monk of the 4th century, who was told to let go of his anthropomorphic image of God. He obeyed, but a little later we hear his cry of anguish: “Woe is me, wretch that I am! They have taken my God from me, and I have no one to lay hold of, nor do I know whom I should adore or address!”

We need to rid ourselves of our attachment to our images. It is the Godhead beyond our images that we are intimately linked with. Our images can prevent our awareness of this link.

If we persevere with meditation we will experience that the nature of the Divine Reality we meet in the silence of meditation is one of love and acceptance. The parable of the Prodigal Son shows the Divine forgiveness that is waiting for us.

Spirituality and psychology go hand in hand. Our images, whether of ourselves or of God, can be a serious block on the path of meditation. These images hide not only who we truly are, but also form the veil that hides the Divine Reality. We need to become conscious of who we truly are: children of God and the temple of the Holy Spirit. That is why Meister Eckhart, like many saints and sages, points out that

The reality we call God has first to be discovered in the human heart; moreover, I cannot come to know God unless I know myself.

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Switching to a Different Mode of Being

The general malaise of our times, especially in the West since the two world wars, is a sense of meaninglessness, of having no power over our life. This leads inevitably to depression and even violence. It is difficult to carry on at times, if we think we live in a meaningless, uncaring universe. Often the early emotional and social imprints that shape our image, behaviour and attitude to the world, make us feel like automatons with “knee-jerk” reactions, adding to this feeling of meaninglessness. We may feel powerless to change; we experience ourselves as prisoners of our past conditioning, prisoners of our own unmet needs, prisoners of the ego.

But we can change! Perhaps not our circumstances, I admit. But however difficult they may be, we can choose to change our attitude to these circumstances: we have the choice not to react in a habitual way; we can leave the prison of the past. The great gift here is meditation.

Because of its emphasis on letting go of thoughts and images, its emphasis on attention, it allows us to switch to the right brain. It allows us to listen in the silence to the promptings of the inner voice of the *self* rather than the chattering surface one of the ego. The *self* challenges us to take up our cross and grow. Insights are afforded, and the opportunity for choice surfaces. We *can* break through our learned responses to the freedom of the present moment; a free creative response *is* possible. Once we become aware of this, we are one step closer to loosening the bonds that bind us on the surface.

This ability to switch from the left brain to the right brain actually gives us the chance of different modes of being. The left-

brain is the logical, analytical, judging, evaluating, language-based part of our being, on which we build our survival strategies and our identity. Very useful and essential! Researchers have even found an area in the left brain they call “the interpreter”, an area where the ego filters our sense impressions and experiences, allowing through only those that affirm our survival strategies. That is why I prefer to call this the “spin doctor”, as the reality it creates is far from the truth. Our meaning here is limited: it comes from our doing and achieving, which is very unpredictable.

But the right brain gives a more holistic and all-inclusive picture; nothing is filtered out. Our true *self* with its connection to the Divine is our source. Here we know not rationally and logically with “the eye of the mind” but intuitively with the “eye of the heart”, a deeper sense of knowing imbued with meaning, a knowing that is wisdom rather than knowledge: true meaning. I am not talking about a general meaning of life for everyone. We each have a unique, individual meaning. In Christianity there is a strong tradition of the concept of “calling” and “destiny” – we are called “by name”. (Isaiah) Each one of us is unique and special. “Calling” always seems to suggest something grand, to do something special, but it can simply mean to be called to be who we really are, where we are: for instance a good parent, empowering others to grow.

With wisdom comes compassion; the right brain is also our centre of our empathy with others, we care for the survival of others, finding here a natural morality. Even a scientist like Einstein encouraged a shift to this way of being. He said:

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift.

It is interesting to see how brain research again substantiates our subjective experiences. When we continue with our faithful repetition of our word, it causes also a decreased activity in the parietal cortex, an area in the brain associated with orientation in

time and space; it creates boundaries. This again is a quality of the ego, creating our world of duality: self/non-self, and the world of opposites. Attention decreases this ego activity, and it dissolves our sense of separation as well as our sense of time and space. Instead, our sense of self expands to include all; there is a strong sense of connectedness with others, creation and the Divine. Paying attention to our mantra therefore has led to the brain switching to a different mode of being, ruled by compassion for ourselves and others.

Brain research, as well as the reports of family and friends of those who have had a stroke affecting the left side of their brain, confirms this change of being. Research has also shown that children under the age of two operate solely from the right side of their brain and still have access to this wider consciousness. This also explains why children take to meditation as ducks to water; they still remember that way of being. Therefore, by meditating and accessing our right-brain way of being we become like little children, as Jesus urged us to do. John Main saw this as a “return to our original innocence”. We become consciously aware of what as a child we were unconsciously aware of – interconnectedness with the Divine ground of being.

The brain is a beautiful God-given instrument. By accessing different parts of it we can tune into different levels of being and different levels of reality. Some atheist scientists equate the mind with the brain and see all perception as a product of the chemical, electrical processes of the brain, but that is like saying that a radio produces its own music.

By meditating as a serious discipline, the brain over time increases the connections between the two halves of the brain. Both sides of our brain then cooperate to give us the full picture. The *self* influences the *ego*, our whole being integrates and unifies itself, opposites are held in harmony; they are not one, they are not two.

How different would our world then be if we were all able to tune in to different realities in that way? Listen to Thomas Merton:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depth of their hearts where neither sin, nor desire, nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in the eyes of the Divine. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time, there would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.

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*The beauty of meditation as a transformative experience is that we do not actually have to do this work on our own.*

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It is the grace of the Spirit of Christ that gives the insights... It is not our own will and effort.

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