

Text from the Tradition: Practical Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill (text drawn from pp. 26-29)

On the training of the attention in preparation for recollection

“Take an idea, an object, and hold it before your mind. The selection is large enough; all sentient beings may find subjects of meditation to their taste, for there lies a universal behind every particular of thought.

But the choice made, it must be held and defended during the time of meditation against all invasions from without, however “spiritual” their disguise, [the object of meditation] must be brooded upon, gazed at, seized again and again, [even] as distractions seem to snatch it from your grasp. A restless boredom, a dreary conviction of your own incapacity, will presently attack you. The first quarter of an hour thus spent in attempted meditation will be, indeed, a time of warfare; which should at least convince you of the distinctions between real time, the true stream of duration which is life, and the sequence of seconds so carefully measured by the clock. Never before has the stream flowed so slowly or fifteen minutes taken so long to pass. Consciousness has been lifted to a longer, slower, rhythm, and is not yet adjusted to its solemn march.

But, striving for this new poise, intent on the achievement of it, you find that you have indeed entered upon a fresh plane of perception, altered your relationship with things. The subject of your meditation begins to exhibit unsuspected meaning, beauty, power. A perpetual growth of significance keeps pace with the increase of attention which you bring to bear on it; You sink into the deeps of it, rest in it, “unite” with it; and learn something of its depth and breadth and height.

Moreover, as your meditation becomes deeper it will defend you from the perpetual assaults of the outer world. You have set a ring of silence you between you and it; and behold! Within that silence you are free. And gradually, you will come to be aware of an entity, a You, who can be aware of, look at, an idea—a universe—other than itself...

Now, turn this new purified and universalized gaze back upon yourself. Observe your own being in a fresh relation with things, and surrender yourself willingly to the moods of astonishment, humility, joy—perhaps of deep shame or sudden love-which invade your heart as you look. So doing patiently, day after day, constantly recapturing the vagrant attention, ever renewing the struggles for simplicity of sight, you will at last discover that there is something within you—something behind the fractious, conflicting life of desire—which you can recollect, gather up, make effective for new life. You will in fact know your own soul for the first time. When you have achieved this power of withdrawing yourself, of making this first crude distinction between appearance and reality, the initial stage of the contemplative life has been won.”

PAUSE

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: Practical Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill by Christine Luna Munger
On the training of the attention in preparation for recollection

In your own meditation/prayer practice, what or who do you offer your attention to during the time set apart for sitting? An object? An idea? Your breath? Your body? Holy Presence?

Underhill suggests using an idea or an object as the focus for meditation. Given her secular audience, this “generic” suggestion seems appropriate.

Within many lineages of Eastern teachings on meditation, including within Hinduism and Buddhism, the suggestion is to focus on a mantra—a word, short phrase, sound or object—which is to be introduced and re-introduced to the conscious mind anytime it becomes aware that it has lost focus. Using a mantra helps to develop mindfulness.

The Jesus Prayer, or Prayer of the Heart, which developed in the Eastern Christian tradition around the sixth century, similarly draws upon using a short phrase over and over again until offering the prayer becomes constant throughout all of one’s activity, spilling over beyond the formal prayer periods.

In recent periods of Christian practice, Thomas Keating and the Centering Prayer movement have made popular the use of a “sacred word,” which is distinguished from the use of a mantra because of its purpose. According to Keating, the intent behind use of the mantra is limited to its ability to help a person focus the mind; whereas the intent of a sacred word is to use it as a symbol of one’s consent to the Presence and Activity of the Holy One. In large part, the distinction is relational—is there a “who” or a “what” behind the object of your attention?

Questions for Reflection: Practical Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill

In your own meditation/prayer practice, what or who do you offer your attention to during your time set apart for sitting?

What difference might it make for your practice whether there is a relational component undergirding the object of your attention?