

Text from the Tradition: Prayer by Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux) (text drawn from pp. 35-38, 42-43)

Forms of Prayer (this text is redacted for inclusive language)

Meditation is an exercise which consists in speculating on [God's existence, attributes, love], and trying to impress on oneself the examples of Christ and [the] Saints. It is a preparation for prayer rather than prayer itself in the true sense. One can hardly say that it aims at making the soul aware of the presence of the living God. It tends too often to remain on the intellectual plane. It is more an exercise about God than a direct contemplation of God. It often provides an excellent start in the aesthetic life, and it is, perhaps, the best thing at the disposal of people who are too exclusively intellectually minded. The aim of prayer, indeed, is not to think about God, nor to form conceptions of God, however strong and lofty they may be. It is for [Godself], for God beyond any sign and any veil, that the soul wants.

Meditation at times develops into a kind of **affective prayer**. This kind of prayer consists of a person interspersing the speculations and mental discourses with fervent aspirations, calls of the heart to God, acts of surrender, so called "dialogues" with the Indweller of the soul. After some time, speculations and the work of the intellect take less and less place and the prayer tends to become a simple outpouring of the heart, sometimes wonderfully sweet, sometimes agonizing, with the Lord imagined as either present within or near at hand. Here again we have an excellent and useful exercise, provided it is not turned to sentimentalism or verbiage. It can never be recommended enough, so long, at least, as the soul has not discovered the higher path up the holy mountain. Yet one should never forget that too often in this kind of prayer it is only an imaginary picture of God with which the soul is conversing.

Next to the prayer of the affections, of devotional aspirations, comes the **prayer of petition**. We are not here thinking of the recitation of formulas supposed to obtain from God as if by magic anything that we may desire. We refer rather to the outpouring of the soul confiding all needs to the Lord, the simple expression of everything long[ed] for. The prayer of petition is essentially the acknowledgement of our weakness and nothingness, the realization that we come from God alone. Nevertheless, adoration may be so much diluted with the temporal or selfish spiritual concern of the praying [person] that it becomes unrecognizable. To bring before God our needs and the needs of those who are dear to us is, of course, a useful starting point in the path of prayer. But to save such a prayer from turning into an endless self-centered conversation with oneself, it has to be purified and progressively drawn higher and higher.

The aim of **yoga** [silence] is to quiet the mind, to free it from its instability and its innate tendency to dispersion, to gather it as it were, at the very center, to lead it, beyond all its activities, to the stillness of pure self-awareness. As long as devoted souls continue to think or feel in prayer, they are still outside the Spiritual Castle. They should never be satisfied by any wonderful thought or any marvelous sense of peace or bliss they may experience. God is beyond. Nothing can satisfy [the soul] but God. Yet the soul is forever unable to reach God as long as [it] has not been willing to pass beyond itself, to plunge right into the abyss of God. Once that is understood, the spiritual [person] is anxious to interweave the whole of life with moments of silence; Silence

during work in routine occupations of the day; Silence above all during meditation, whatever form it may take. Silence will first be silence of the tongue, then silence of useless thoughts and desires, and finally silence of any thought, even of the highest. This last silence is the one which has to be sought as often as possible during times assigned to special meditation or contemplation. This silence will be a simple listening to the Spirit within and without, a simple looking at the One who is present within and without, simply being attentive, being aware, being awake.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

As a spiritual director, privileged to sit with folks as they tune into and develop their prayer life and relationship to God, I often feel saddened when those I companion expend lots of mental and emotional energy in trying to muster up efforts at prayer forms that simply do not meet them where they actually are. I certainly am included among these fine folks and our flitting efforts. Often, our faithful efforts become mis-directed toward narrow notions of ourselves and of God. We limit ourselves when we try to pray as we think we “should” or as we “want to,” rather than simply as we actually do. This limit on ourselves is often accompanied by a parallel limitation that we place on God. It usually takes the form of assuming that God thinks we “should” be or that God “wants us” to be somewhere on our prayer journey that actually we are not. In truth, in actuality, God is always and already meeting us where we actually are, beyond our limited notions, enticing us and wooing us toward further communion, but never cutting us off, as if we could somehow be separate from God because of our own ability or inability, our own perception of our place on the journey. Beyond space and time, God is free to meet us exactly where we are, always and already. Ironically, the most “advanced” form of prayer described by Abhishiktananda is the simplest. Indeed, most of us need many years of regular practice to shed off the layers of “shoulds” and “wants” before we are ready to simply look up from where we are and gaze at the Holy One before, behind, within, and around us, always and already enfolding our efforts at prayer.

Questions for Reflection:

- What do you notice about your preferences for different prayer forms at different times?
- Whether you conceive of God as personal, relational, or non-relational, what is your sense (or not) of having been met along your particular journey?