

Text from the Tradition: Sadhana: A Way to God by Anthony de Mello (text drawn from pp. 22-3, 3-5)

Silence as revelation in Contemplative Prayer

“I want you now to discover the revelation that silence brings. To take in the revelation that Scripture offers, you must expose yourself to Scripture. To take in the revelation that Silence offers, you must first attain silence. And this is not easy. Most people discover, to their surprise, that silence is something they are simply not accustomed to. That no matter what they do they cannot still the constant wandering of their mind or quieten an emotional turmoil they feel within their heart. Others feel themselves approaching the frontiers of silence. Then they panic and withdraw. Silence can be a frightening experience. No need to be discouraged. Even those wandering thoughts of yours are a great revelation, aren't they? The fact that your mind wanders, isn't that a revelation about yourself? It is not enough to know this. You must take time to experience this wandering mind. And the type of wandering it indulges in—how revealing that is too!

And here's something encouraging for you: The fact that you were aware of your mental wanderings or of your inner turmoil or of your inability to be still shows that you have some small degree of silence within you, at least a sufficient amount to be aware of all this. It is this minimal silence that you have within you that we shall build on [in practice.] As it grows, it will reveal to you more and more about yourself. Or, more accurately, silence will reveal yourself to you. That is its first revelation: your self. And in and through this revelation you will attain things money cannot buy, things like wisdom and serenity and joy and God. To attain these priceless things, it is not enough for you to reflect, talk, discuss. What you will need is work. Get to work right now.

Don't seek anything sensational in the revelation that silence brings—lights, inspirations, insights. In fact, don't seek at all. Limit yourself to observing. Just take in everything that comes to your awareness. Everything, no matter how trite and ordinary, that is thus revealed to you. All your revelation may consist of is the fact that your hands are clammy or that you have an urge to change your posture or that you are worried about your health. No matter. The important thing is that you have become aware of this. The content of your awareness is less important than the quality of the awareness. As the quality improves, your silence will deepen. As your silence deepens, you will experience change. And you will discover, to your delight, that revelation is not knowledge. Revelation is power; a mysterious power that brings transformation.”

“[Often] there is a vast number of thoughts and words and images that we constantly interpose between ourselves and God when we are communicating... Words sometimes serve to impede rather than foster communication and intimacy. Silence—of words and thoughts—can sometimes be the most powerful form of communication and union when [our] hearts are full of love. Our communication with God, however, is not quite so simple a matter. I can gaze lovingly into the eyes of an intimate friend and communicate beyond words. But what do I gaze into when I gaze silently at God? An imageless, formless reality. A blank! Some mystics recommend that we gaze at this blank lovingly. And it requires a good deal of faith to gaze with love and yearning at what seems like just nothing when we first get in touch with it.”

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: Sadhana: A Way to God, Anthony de Mello by Christine Luna Munger

Perhaps it is best that I not say or write anything further. How often does chitter-chatter keep our attention on the surface of matters!

Yet, our friend Anthony de Mello invites us to depth through both our words and our silence. In today's reading, Tony weaves together a classic theological term, "revelation" with what I like to call a "spirituality of seeing." And, he suggests that silence is the thread that does the weaving.

Whereas Christians often associate the term "revelation" with the public and official communications of God, the act of gazing, or a spirituality of seeing, reminds us that God also communicates directly and personally with us. God's presence and activity permeates all layers of our experience—social, communal, personal. Imagine the quality of our interactions with one another if we were to actively offer our attention and intention to the many layers as they unfold in any given moment! Just as the external words of scripture or of an intentional conversation with a friend can reveal God's communications to us, so too, the internal silence, absence of words, or the meanderings of my mind and heart can also reveal the activity and presence of the Holy One.

Most of us are trained by our cultures and our families to expend most of our attention on the surface of daily life experience. Anthony de Mello reminds us that we are capable of so much more! Through the use of our natural human faculties, our "mystic minds and hearts," we can hone our awareness and perceive the "more" that lies behind and below the surface of our daily life interactions. When we set aside an intentional period of time, on a regular basis, to practice the discipline of silence as a habit of prayer, we increase not only our abilities to perceive the great Silent Mystery of God, but also the likelihood that we could perceive the great revelation, the loving gaze, with which God is always, already looking at each one of us. Imagine the quality of our interactions with one another if we could see others as God sees them!

Questions for Reflection: Sadhana: A Way to God, Anthony de Mello

- What has been your experience of silence? How would you describe your awareness of silence?
- When or with whom have you offered or received a loving gaze? What was revealed?