

Text from the Tradition: Practical Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill (text drawn from pp. 22-23, 25-26, 36-37, 41, 44)
Forms of Prayer

“Recollection [is] the art which the practical [person] is now invited to learn, in essence it is no more and no less than the subjection of the attention to the control of the will. Recollection is a constantly renewed retreat to the quiet center of the Spirit... Recollection is a change of the attention, which enables you to perceive a truer universe.”

“[Related to recollection], simplification [is a pre-cursor to recollection and involves] a deliberate withdrawal of attention from the bewildering multiplicity of things, a deliberate humble surrender of [one’s] image-making consciousness...this gathering point of self-hood is already there within; it is an important possession which adds dignity to [human] existence, yet [humans] rarely take time to go in.”

“Self-adjustment follows recollection and] is a deliberate rearrangement of your ideas, energies, and desires in harmony with that which you have seen [in recollection]—a progressive uniformity of life and experience... [If recollection changes attention, self-adjustment changes the affect and the will].”

“Related to self-adjustment, purgation, detachment, and mortification are tools for adjusting]. Purgation is the disciplining and simplifying of the affections and will, of the orientation of the heart. Detachment is the refusal to anchor yourself to material things, to regard existence from the personal standpoint, or confuse custom with necessity. Mortification means to resolve the turbulent whirlpools and currents of your own conflicting passions, interests, and desires; it is the killing out of all those tendencies which the peaceful vision of recollection would condemn, and which create the fundamental opposition between your interior and exterior life.”

“Meditation is a half-way house between thinking and contemplating; and as a discipline, it derives its chief value from this transitional character. The real mystical life, which is the truly practical life, begins not with supernatural acts and ecstatic apprehensions, but with the normal faculties of the human person. ‘I do not require of you,’ says Teresa [of Avila] to her pupils in meditation, “to form great and curious considerations in your understanding; I require of you no more than *to look.*’

“Indeed, one of the best definitions of contemplation has described it as a ‘loving sight.’ At this early stage, you are not asked to look at anything new, to peer into the deeps of things; only to gaze with a new and cleansed vision on ordinary intellectual images...contemplation is an act of love, the wooing, not the critical study, of Divine Reality. It is an eager outpouring of ourselves toward a Somewhat Other for which we feel a passion of desire; a seeking, touching, and tasting, not a considering or analyzing.”

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: Practical Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill by Christine Luna Munger *Forms of Prayer*

Folks often ask about the differences between meditation and contemplation. Folks *also* often ask about the differences in the terms as they relate to practice among the great world traditions, now especially in Buddhism and Christianity. Broadly, we could categorize Buddhist teaching as leaning toward meditation and Christian teaching as leaning toward contemplation, though both traditions recognize nuances between the two terms. Generally, meditation is practice that hones the faculty of the mind, while contemplation is practice that suffuses all of the faculties, including one's affect and will. Within the classic Christian model of *lectio divina*, which arose out of centuries of daily monastic practice and became popularized late in the 12th century by a Carthusian monk, Guigio II, through his text *Scala Claustralium (The Ladder of Monks)*, there are four steps on a metaphorical ladder, which correlate to decreasing efforts in prayer as one ascends the ladder; for example meditation is a second step flowing from the first active step of reading; in meditation, the practitioner ruminates, or thinks on, the meaning of the text. A third step, prayer, flows from meditation and is presumably dialogical. Contemplation, as the final step, flows from prayerful conversation into a state of restful communion and adoration.

Recollection is a classic Christian term that refers to the active gathering of oneself in preparation for meditation and contemplation. Among the three, recollection requires the most active effort, and is considered a foundation for meditation and contemplation. Underhill emphasizes the important role of effort related to one's practice and addresses the question of where precisely the locus of effort should come from and flow toward. The onus and locus of effort in prayer, ultimately, lands on the side of Divine Action; that is to say that human efforts toward effecting prayer mostly end up distracting us and feeding the subtle activity of our egos. We are constantly tempted to try too hard; we resist the simplicity of letting go and surrendering our own efforts into the hands of more encompassing Divine Activity. This is an important insight and a lifelong struggle for most of us.

However, as Underhill insists, we must not be too eager to dismiss the value and necessity of effort—especially in the early stages of our nascent practice, when we are just beginning to train our attention. Underhill regularly uses assertive language in her texts about the need for our concerted efforts such as in: *fighting* for the formation of a strong discipline of regular prayer; *defending* one's focus during the time of meditation; *intensely reaching out* toward God and others; *striving* to overcome the sense of contrariness caused by the two layers of Reality; she basically beckons us to do everything we can possibly muster from our strength and commitment to “show up” to prayer...and then, once we've arrived, we should be determined to hand over our own efforts, trusting that larger, stronger hands are also holding everything that is and doing all that needs to be done, always and already.

Questions for Reflection: Practical Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill

- Which aspect of the contemplative process are you drawn to at this time? (recollection, simplification, etc)?
- How do you hold the tension between effort and surrender when you show up to prayer?