

Text from the Tradition: Awareness by Anthony de Mello (text drawn from pp. 5, 35-6, 102-103, 78-84)

Awareness as Waking Up to Wisdom

“Spirituality means waking up. Most people, even though they don’t know it, are asleep. They’re born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they breed children in their sleep, they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and the beauty of this thing that we call human existence. All mystics...are unanimous on one thing: that all is well, all is well. Though everything is a mess, all is well. Strange paradox, to be sure. But tragically, most people never get to see that all is well because they are asleep. They are having a nightmare.”

“The only way someone can be of help to you is in challenging your ideas...What is this most important thing of all? It’s called self-observation. No one can help you there. No one can give you a method. No one can show you a technique...It is not the same as self-absorption. Self-absorption is self-preoccupation, where you’re concerned about yourself, worried about yourself. [What is self-observation?] It means to watch everything in you and around you as far as possible and watch it as if it were happening to someone else. [This] means that you do not personalize what is happening to you. It means that you look at things as if you have no connection with them whatsoever. The reason you suffer from your depression and your anxieties is that you identify with them. You say, “I’m depressed.” But that is false. You are not depressed. If you want to be more accurate, you might say, “I am experiencing a depression right now.” You are not your depression.”

“Awareness, awareness, awareness! In awareness is healing; in awareness is truth; in awareness is salvation; in awareness is spirituality; in awareness is growth; in awareness is love; in awareness is awakening. Awareness. I must explain to you why it is, when we look at a tree, we really don’t see. We think we do, but we don’t...What we’re seeing is something that we fixed in our mind. We get an impression and we hold on to that impression, and we keep looking at a person through that impression. And we do this with almost everything. If you understand that, you will understand the loveliness and beauty of being aware of everything around you. Reality is there; “God,” whatever that is, is there. It’s all there...If we would just open our eyes and see, then we would understand.”

[How to see?] Four steps to wisdom: the first thing to do is get in touch with negative feelings that you are not even aware of. Lots of people have feelings they are not aware of. Get in touch with those feelings first. Second, understand that the feeling is in you, not in reality. Negative feelings are in you, not in reality. So stop trying to change reality! The mystics keep trying to tell us that reality is alright. The third step is never to identify with that feeling. Don’t define your essential self in terms of that feeling. Yes, there is a depression there right now, there are hurt feelings there right now, but let it be, leave it alone. It will pass. Everything passes. Everything. If you remember this, if you say it to yourself a thousand times, if you try these three steps a thousand times, you will get it. You might not need to do it even three times. [The fourth step is not to try and change things, but to change yourself.] We always want someone else to change so that we will feel good. When you awaken, when you understand, when you see, the world becomes right.”

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: Awareness as Waking Up to Wisdom, by Christine Luna Munger

For some people, the wake up call is dramatic, intense and fiery, perhaps akin to St. Paul's conversion, the Holy One, knocking us out. For some people, the wake up call is subtle, ongoing, and warm, perhaps akin to my experience of growing up and praying the rosary every day, day after day, sacredness, slowly sinking in. No matter how we are awoken, De Mello entreats us into the awareness of awakening with urgent and practical practice.

For many on our planet in this time and in these days, facing a world-wide pandemic is a not-so-welcome wake up call. Though similarly urgent to de Mello's call to awareness, most of us recognize a sense of ineptness as we face practical questions...what will happen? When will it happen? What should I do? What should I not do? What will life be like three months from now? In times of pandemic, "the unknown," a lack of clarity, certainty, and safety seems an unwelcome stranger rather than a benevolent guest. The truth of this unwelcome stance likely shows up in our feeling world as worry, fear, freaking out. In our mental world, we likely see blame, anxiety, obsession, plans for control, a need to fill up our days with whatever.

The benefit of contemplative practice, of fostering an awareness of our inner worlds, is that we can recognize these negative feelings and thoughts. Truth be told, they need to be seen. It does no good to push them under a rug of busyness or denial. And, another truth be told, they also need to be let go of. It does no good to cling to them like long-lost treasures of blind assurance. Having seen the torrents and the turmoil of the mind and heart, we can face them straight on. Once recognized, once seen and heard for whatever message they may carry for us, we can then let go of them. Let us not cling to, nor avoid, any of the myriad of thoughts and motions that will pass through our minds and hearts in the upcoming months. Let us face what confronts us. Let us tell one another, in solemnity and solidarity, what we have seen. And let us allow together that this, too, shall pass.

Questions for Reflection:

- What negative feelings and thoughts and sensations are you aware of within yourself? What might they be trying to say?
- What specific practices, techniques, and teaching has helped you to develop your natural capacity for self-awareness?