

Text from the Tradition: Will and Spirit by Gerald May (text drawn from pp. 314-318)

Silence

Silence is the one technique or discipline that is constant through all contemplative traditions. It seems to be the fundamental activity that people can perform in themselves in the service of their own spiritual awakening...Spiritual pilgrims frequently find that their times of intentional meditation are nowhere near as peaceful or revealing as [unitive] moments that happen spontaneously at other times. Meditation and quiet prayer are seldom easy, and they are much more generally characterized by considerable tension and frustration. Surely there is no simple cause and effect relationship between meditation and spiritual growth; those who assume this are in for considerable disappointment...

From a psychological standpoint, meditation allows us to glimpse the quality and nature of our awareness in moments when we are not wholly occupied with its contents. These glimpses, though not “producing” any special spiritual maturity, do provide a sense of reassurance that the usual thoughts, moods, feelings, and perceptions that govern the majority of our lives are but fleeting events within a far wider and deeper reality of consciousness. Perhaps the greatest psychological reassurance comes from the realization that there is a level of awareness beneath or beyond all these contents that is permanent, enduring, and utterly unaffected by anything that may occur...Thus meditation, if it is open and simply noticing what is, provides a window upon the eternal reality that undergirds and infuses our being. It does not...help us to achieve any constant awareness of that reality, but it surely does let us know that it exists, and this...helps us to remember.

Silence by virtue of its enforced confrontation with personal awareness, serves as an emphatic reminder of mystery...Thoughts and feelings rise and fall of their own accord, somehow intricately associated with breathing and with the position of one's body and eyes; levels of attention range from alertness to lethargy all beyond one's control, and qualities of perception wax and wane through a kaleidoscope of changes totally out of range of one's own willful influence.

In these ways and many others, quiet time acts as a reminder of the mystery and the vastness that is our heritage, while simultaneously humbling us...The practice of quiet is an exercise in “not- doing”...a study in surrender and willingness, a discipline of letting go. Each time we sit quietly, the silence takes us as far as we can go at that moment toward the loosening of our preconceived images of ourselves, and it teaches us as much as we can learn about the fallibilities of dualistic thought. Thus, though the practice of quiet does not actually lead to unitive realization in an arbitrarily causal way, it does give us room to grow in our acceptance of unitive insight, and it nurtures our willingness to endure the threats that this may impose on our self-importance. Finally, it calls us onward; it nourishes our spirits and encourages our hearts for whatever may be the next step in our journey towards the Real...

The practice of quiet reflection, whether labeled as prayer or meditation, seems to be an absolutely and universally essential part of any contemplative pilgrimage. One cannot expect to grow in spiritual awareness without some intentional practice of silence. Yet neither can one expect that such practice will in any way

produce spiritual awakening. Meditation is necessary, yet it has no apparent causal effect upon the outcome of one's journey. For this reason, it is risky to view silence as a means to any kind of end. To shackle it with such expectations is to disrupt its natural quality from the outset and to enter instead into the confounding arena of success and failure, achievement and grasping. Once this disruption has occurred, we start worrying about the quality of our experience, identifying "good" meditations that have a deep relaxation or exciting visions and "bad" ones characterized by restlessness, mental noise, or lethargy. This, of course, places our willfulness back in the driver seat in the presumption that we know what we need in order to grow in spirit. We assume that the quiet, open, noise free, relaxed meditations are "better" for our growth than the ones that are difficult or tense. Then we struggle to avoid bad ones and achieve good ones, and the whole process becomes subservient to our effortful, willful striving.

In true willingness, it seems to me that a person might deal with this through a kind of prayer that says, in effect, "Lord, I shall try to relax and be open, for it seems to me that this is what is needed. But all in all, I dedicate this time to you. Do with me what you will, work in me as you will, give me quiet or noise, peace or pain, clarity or distraction. Strip me or console me, wound me or caress me, for in my heart I am nothing but grateful for your love..." Contemplative prayer is best viewed as nothing other than preparing oneself in willingness for appreciation of closeness to God, whether or not this appreciation is actually experienced. Another way of viewing quiet is to see it as a time in which one seeks to be present to God...

However the process may be conceptualized, silence cannot be made to happen. If we go back to our old image of mind as water, there is no way to cause the water to be stilled and clarified other than simply to wait with vigilance and let it settle. Silence, if it is to come at all, must be allowed to happen. It cannot be forced. In practice this involves letting turbulent thoughts and feelings come and go, rise and fall, as they will, until they begin to settle down on their own, or until one begins to sense the silence that exists eternally behind them... Sometimes the noise does not settle down on its own... This too must be accepted. To engage in effortful struggles to force the mind to behave can do nothing but stir up even more cloudiness and turbulence as a result of the struggle.

With great concentration it may be possible to *create* a kind of silence that is maintained by forceful refusal to admit any distraction into awareness. But this kind of silence, being of one's own willful making, is really nothing more than an *image* of quiet. It is a kind of "empty content" of awareness that is bounded by tension and repression, revealing nothing of the dynamic, energy-filled, lively emptiness of true quiet. True silence exists always, but it is often not easily experienced. Still, as with God, the seeking seems to be more important than the actual sensory experience in the long run. As with God, silence may sometimes be as deeply appreciated in the absence as in the presence of its experience.

Questions for Reflection: generally, what do you notice in your mind, heart, and senses in response to the text?

- How do you treat thoughts, feelings, sensations during quiet prayer; what do you "do" with them?
- If we neither, "cling to" nor "push away" thoughts in quiet prayer, why face them at all?