



Meditatio

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Grace at Work

The Healing Power of Meditation

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*Where sin is, there is grace in abundance.
Grace heals the wound of the human soul.*

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If anything expresses the nature of God, it is this story of The Prodigal Son – there is no resentment, no punishment, no condemnation at all, only the joy. If we accept this understanding of God that we see in the story, if this is our image of God, this is how we can be open to God. Meditation is about finding this God within ourselves, in an indissoluble union with us because this love of God cannot reject us.

1

Grace at Work

To find meditation in one's life is a grace. It's something unexpected, and finding in an unexpected moment, in an unexpected way, something that changes the world for you.

It has been a real grace for me to come into contact with the 12-Step Program. I think is the most important spiritual movement of the last century. Through the meditation community that's grown up over the last 30 years, I have come to meet some wonderful recovering alcoholics who have found, in meditation, a way of putting the 11th Step into practice, really understanding what that means.

I've always felt that at the right moment in their life, the alcoholic understands the meaning of meditation better than most people. It's a hard one, understanding, to hit bottom maybe more than once to get to that point. But with it comes an insight; it can be a destructive disease, it can be a fatal disease, it can destroy your life, destroy your relationships, but it also has the possibility of leading to a remarkable breakthrough. I suppose what the whole AA movement, the fellowship, is all about is maximising the potential of the disease to lead to that enlightenment. There's a potential in it. The programme is a remarkable construction that helps, has helped people to use that potentially destructive set of circumstances in their life and potentially destructive disease to lead to a spiritual growth – actually to lead to a deep integration and fullness of life. The times I've been to AA groups, the word I would use is grace really, the feeling of grace at work.

What do I mean by grace? A special energy of honesty and truth and goodness and healing. To me it is a kind of Eucharist;

it's a kind of a communion in the spirit, which is uplifting. What I've always found at those meetings is that there's no small talk. There's a friendliness and intimacy, honesty, but the normal divisions or barriers or suspicions that we have about each other, and the social filters that we communicate through normally, are not there. By their being there they are admitting and confessing and opening to themselves and to others. The fact that there has been no small talk means that people can get down to important issues.

People are telling *my story* and as they tell *my story* I think they are sharing a mystery. *My story*, mystery: only one letter between the two. And they're telling *my story* as if they are discovering the mystery. And each time they tell it they are adding something to it or they are understanding it more deeply. What is the meaning of *my story*, what is the mystery of *my story*? Now that sounds a little egocentric, and I think there is quite a lot of egocentricity in the programme. By the very nature of it there has to be, there has to be a concentration on self. I don't think it is actually egocentricity, I think it is a transformation of the ego, it's a healing of the ego. But there's a lot of ego there – it's me, isn't it? There is nothing wrong with that provided there is a transformation going on. There's nothing worse than getting stuck in oneself. And that of course is what addiction is – getting stuck, getting into a repetitive cycle and you end up hating yourself. You just hear your own voice and you get stuck in your own patterns of behaviour. So telling *my story* opens one to a mystery that is mysterious – it's something that I cannot put my finger on, I cannot explain fully, rationally. I can experience it, but I can't control it even.

What I'd like to do is share with you an understanding of meditation that might resonate with you. Really the most important way to learn about meditation is to do it, practise it together. There is a group dynamic to meditation, just as there is in recovery. The two are very interestingly comparable or complementary, actually I think. In a 12-Step Programme one is un-learning a habit, a deeply ingrained, physically and chemically

conditioned habit with very complicated and strong psychological and physiological forms and patterns. So one is breaking out of that, breaking a habit. In learning to meditate one is learning to put on a good habit.

There are difficulties on both sides; they are different kinds of difficulties – giving up drinking or taking up meditation. Both are difficult; both require strength, more strength than we have just in our own ego resources. So we have to open to a Higher Power and we have to open to community; we have to open to others. You call it ‘fellowship’; in the meditation world I would call it ‘community’.

Meditation seems to me to be in that sense a grace. Something that is a gift, something that is genuinely free, it doesn’t cost anything and there is no bargaining about meditation. To find meditation in one’s life is a grace. It’s something unexpected, and finding in an unexpected moment, in an unexpected way, something that changes the world for you. It changes patterns that we – for some reason or another, because of our own mistakes or because of bad luck or a combination of the two – have gotten into; it breaks those patterns. ~

2

From Desire to Addiction

Meditation is not some magic pill that cures addiction, but it is a necessary step in recovery. It does it in a very simple, radical way by cutting through the images. If we let go of the images, it breaks the cycle of desire, and we will be free to restart, eventually, if we persevere.

I'd like to look at the human condition that we find ourselves in, which makes meditation a real gift when you find it, the human condition that can be changed by your accepting this gift at the right moment. We start with basic human needs. We have physical needs; if these physical needs are not met, even as children – food, drink, shelter – we will suffer physical consequences because those basic physical needs were not met. Basic nutrition, basic physical care, if it isn't provided in the right way in the right quantity will lead to permanent changes in our physical appearance, the way we operate physically, like our immune system where the patterns of that are set very early in life. Then we have other needs, social needs, educational needs, we need to have our gifts and talents identified, recognised, and developed. And again if we don't, we suffer intellectually, we suffer socially, culturally. Sometimes we can make up lost ground but most people don't.

And then there are also emotional needs of course. We need to be loved and we have a very high demand for love. We demand to be loved exclusively as young children, we find it very difficult to share love, and there is sibling rivalry. It's almost inevitable, even if we come from a very loving family with healthy parents and healthy environment, it's really impossible that we're not going to experience some deprivation, that at some point we are not going to be loved when we need it or as much as we need it.

Even in the best of families and the most functional of families.

Now, whenever a basic human need, whether it is physical or psychological or cultural or social or emotional, whenever a basic human need is not met, we experience a wound. It's a hurt, it's a hurt by negation, it is a hurt by deprivation. That's not even speaking about maybe actual intentional harm that is done to us, which is even more horrific and damaging. But even if it's unintentional, just in the normal circumstances of life when human needs are not met, we experience a wound. And those wounds remain with us for life. If you didn't get enough love as a child, then 50 years later you are not going to be able to rewind the tape, go back and fill in what you didn't get 20 or 30 years ago. So wounds stay with us for life. In Christian imagery that's very graphically represented in the resurrection appearances of Jesus. After Jesus rises from the dead and he shows himself to his disciples he still has his wounds. Now the wounds have been healed, but the wounds are still visible and they are part of our eternal character.

What happens when we are wounded? We feel pain. That's what a wound is, it's physical pain. Our immediate instinct is to rub it and take the pain away or to take a pill to take the pain away. Even if there are side effects, we still take pills to take the pain away. What about emotional wounds? Emotional wounds are more difficult to heal. They hurt, sometimes especially when these wounds are deeply imbedded in our early history. We don't even know where the pain comes from. We didn't know as a child, we weren't conscious as a child of the fact that I wasn't being loved enough or I wasn't being given this or I wasn't being given that (like enough attention). We just didn't have that conscious language or awareness to be able to identify that, and a great deal of healing of emotional wounds is being able to name it, understand it, to know where it's coming from. It's the first step in the healing, very often. But as a child we don't have it and so the ache – this hunger, thirst for something more is often buried deep within us. It has a good side to it too, which is

our human capacity for growth and transcendence, but it can also be involved deeply with our psychological woundedness.

So what do we do when we feel pain? We want something to take it away. At the emotional or psychological level, what we do is to imagine, form an image of what will take the pain away, that would make me feel better. We are going to identify our hopes – our longing, to be free from pain, to be whole, to be happy, to be peaceful – we are going to identify those hopes with that image. The next step is to say, ‘If I can get what I’m imagining in reality, then I will feel better, this pain will be taken away.’ Now, the problem is that the image at some point then becomes a desire, and it has now begun to take on a life of its own at the imaginative level.

So, the image now, through a high level of concentration and paying a lot of attention to that image, putting a lot of hope in that image, it begins to form a desire and to enter into the life of our desires. So then, we start going after the desire. If the desire is to make a lot of money, that’s it, that’s my goal; or to achieve fame, power or success in whatever area of life I am working; or it may be a sexual desire; it could even be a desire for spiritual enlightenment. The problem is that, even if we find the desire, we do fulfil our ambitions, we get what we want, it doesn’t take the pain away. It does temporarily, because the satisfaction of any desire takes the pain away temporarily. But then, the nature of the life of desire is that it is cyclical. It comes back. After you’ve satisfied it, it comes back again.

Then we discover that fulfilling our desire – getting the job we wanted, getting the success we wanted, getting the sexual satisfaction we wanted – that that does not actually address this deeper ache, this deeper hunger, this deeper need that is felt as a pain. And then I think we begin to get quite complex. We begin to branch out into desires breeding desires, when we will experience a greater and greater alienation from the original need, the wound, the unmet need.

Now, in that pattern of desire, which is pretty much the human condition. It’s what the Buddha focused on as the cause

of all suffering. If you are unlucky, then one of those desires is going easily to become an addiction. Whether it is physiological or psychological, it's almost inevitable that one of those many complex desires that we form is going to hook us into a compulsive cycle in which we lose our freedom and it takes us over.

How does meditation come into this? At the right time in one's journey, in one's life, if you have the grace of hearing about it, meditation becomes a way of dealing with this condition – in the 12-Step Program, in the 11th Step: 'by raising our conscious contact with God through prayer and meditation.' It isn't then that meditation is some magic pill that cures addiction, but it is a necessary step in recovery.

And what is recovery? Healing. It's recovering the wholeness that we have tragically but necessarily lost. Necessarily lost, because that is the human condition, we are going to lose it anyway. And in recovering, in healing, in regaining the wholeness, we're actually better off than we were before. Recovery doesn't mean going back, healing doesn't mean going back to a time before you were wounded. It means dealing with the wounds that you've got with the story that you have, that you are, and evolving that, taking that to the next stage of its meaning – finishing the story, continuing to tell the story, to live the story until you discover what is the end of the story. You don't know yet.

How does meditation do this? It does it in a very simple, radical way. We do it by cutting through, in a nonviolent way, the images. Because if we let go of the images, it breaks the cycle of desire. If we break through the cycle of desire, we break that pattern, if we can break it at least temporarily and if we continue to break it often enough, it will eventually dissolve. It will be broken and we will be free to restart, eventually, if we do the work, if we stay with it, if we persevere. ~

3

The Prayer of the Heart

In the Christian tradition, meditation is called the 'prayer of the heart'. It's in the heart-consciousness that physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of ourselves find unity, find harmony, and integration

The experience of meditation is the experience of integration and wholeness. In the Christian tradition it's called the 'prayer of the heart'. The heart is a symbol, not only of interiority, and it's much more than just a symbol of emotions. The heart is really a symbol spiritually, in all traditions, of wholeness, of integrity, integration. It's in the heart-consciousness that physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of ourselves find unity, find harmony, and integration.

Take a moment to sit comfortably. Your feet flat on the ground. Hands on your lap or on your knees. Relax your shoulders. Now take a word, a mantra, and repeat the word continually throughout the time of the meditation, coming back to the word as often as you become distracted.

Choosing the word is important because you want to stay with the same word all the way through the meditation and in fact from day to day. Normally, we would say choose a word that is sacred in your own tradition. It is helpful if the word is not in your own language because then it won't stimulate your imagination or your thoughts, feelings. And the sound of the word is important because that can help to calm the mind. The word I would recommend is the word *maranatha*. It's an Aramaic word, the Hebrew language, the language that Jesus spoke. If you choose that word, say it as four syllables, ma-ra-na-tha. It means 'Come, Lord.'

We are not thinking about the meaning of the word as we say it. Meditation is not what you think. So you're not trying to get good thoughts. Obviously it is better to have good thoughts than

bad thoughts, but you're not trying to get good thoughts. And you're not trying to fight off the bad thoughts. You're just letting go of all thoughts, images, or ideas as they arise. If you choose that word, say it as four syllables, with equal stress on each syllable, ma-ra-na-tha. Listen to the word as a sound; listen to it as you say it. Say it calmly, gently, without force. Say it patiently. Say it without judgment; you're not judging your performance. Don't let the idea of failure, don't entertain that idea. Let that idea go as well. That's just another distraction. And just humbly, like a child, keep coming back to the word with simple attention: ma-ra-na-tha.

Sit as still as you can. The stillness of body will help you come to a stillness of mind. Begin to say the words silently without moving your lips or your tongue. Just silently in stillness, interiorly, listen to the word as you say it. I wouldn't visualise it. Just say it and listen to it interiorly: ma-ra-na-tha. ~

4

Paying Attention

Attention is love. What we're doing in meditation is we are loving, and the effects of this work of attention in the meditation periods will be translated into our lives in the form of love. You basically become more loving people, capable of receiving love.

What are we doing in meditation? We are doing something very simple, very profound, and very transformative; we are *paying attention*. When I say that we are letting go of our images and our desires as they arise in the form of distractions, we're not fighting them. We're not saying, 'That's bad, I shouldn't be feeling that, I shouldn't be wanting that, I shouldn't be having that.' We are not judging them as they arise. We know they're there, we accept them. We're not trying to suppress them, because if you try to suppress them you'll lose. What we do is we take our attention off them. And so, with infinite patience, you are simply letting go. It's like a ship going through the water. You steer your way through the waves of the mind – the desires, the images, the fantasies, the memories, the plans. Gently, one by one, you let them go by taking your attention off them. And we do that by giving our attention to the mantra. That's how it works.

Now, what is attention? Attention is a very important quality of life. The addict has got into an unfortunate state in which their attention has become fixated on one desire – the next drink, the next hit, or the next whatever it is. That's a fixated attention. Because it's fixated on the wrong thing, and a destructive thing, it messes up your whole life – your marriages, your relationships, your work, and everything. Because the other things you should be giving your attention to, you can't because of this fixation. Now I can't force you to pay attention. We could lock the doors,

strap you into the chairs, but I couldn't force you to pay attention. Which means that paying attention is a free choice. It's an expression of freedom, which is the opposite of addiction. So by paying attention and exercising that capacity, that freedom, that gift of being able to pay attention, you are doing something very essentially human and healthy and natural.

What is attention? Attention is love. Any act of attention is an act of love. If you choose to pay attention, you are discovering that it is work. And you'd have to choose to do the work; no one else can do it for you. If you choose to do that work, you are in effect, in a sense, giving yourself to the person or the thing that you are paying attention to. We talk about giving attention don't we? It's like giving oneself. And if we don't receive attention we feel neglected, we feel badly treated, or we feel hurt, damaged in some way by that. If we do receive attention, this is I think what the fellowship of AA is all about, and what amazes me in the group meetings I've been to, is the attention of the group to the individual who is speaking. It's a very powerful attention but it is a very healing attention, and everybody is in the healing process. Those who give attention and those who, individually at that particular meeting, receive the attention. The relationship between the sponsor and the recovering alcoholic is really a very deep relationship, deep spiritual relationship in which attention is being given.

Attention is love. What we're doing in meditation, and I'm not using this in any sense pious language or sentimental language, but we are loving. It may not feel like it emotionally at the time, but we are loving, and the effects of this work of attention in the meditation periods will be translated into our lives in the form of love. You basically become more loving people, capable of receiving love. Love is a two way street – giving and receiving.

This is how I understand meditation: in paying attention to the mantra as we say it, however many times we fail, however many times we fall off and get distracted, we are nevertheless doing the work that has an accumulative effect. And it works in the simplest possible way, by cutting through the jungle, the

labyrinth, the undergrowth of our years and years of accumulated memories, plans, desires, images. It is the simplest therapy of all in that sense.

But it's not easy, it's not easy. Because it isn't easy, you have to accept that you're not going to be perfect. It's not about being perfect. No healing work, no true spirituality is about being perfect. Being on a spiritual path, is not about being perfect; it's about believing in wholeness and accepting humbly the process, the stages of healing. ~

Joy is Deeper than Desire

Meditation doesn't destroy desire, but it does transform desire. It puts you into touch with what you really want. In quite a radical way of sorting and simplifying ourselves, it puts you back into touch with your basic need, which is your basic desire. Then joy springs up.

The whole reason for any spiritual practice is to release joy, to discover our full capacity for joy, in discovering the real nature of joy or the real nature of happiness. The mistake every human being who has ever lived has fallen into is to think that happiness consists in the satisfaction of our desires. There is nothing wrong in getting what we want, provided it doesn't do harm to anybody else or do harm to ourselves. It's not that pleasure is bad or getting what you want or fun is bad really. It's just that the nature of joy is not fully experienced in getting what you want. For example – I have a friend who works with the dying; for 30 years he's worked with dying patients, terminally ill patients – and he says that his clinical experience and his research has led him to realise that most people, if their physical pain is taken care of, their psychological needs are met, and if they've had some sort of sense of meaning in life, will say, as they face death knowing they've got so many weeks or months to live, will say, 'I have never had such a good quality of life.' And I think that shows exactly what I was saying, that actually you can be joyful even in a time of suffering, when you're not getting what you want or you're actually getting something negative.

So joy is deeper than desire. That's basic religious wisdom. It's the wisdom that you find in all the great spiritual traditions. So meditation doesn't destroy desire, because life without desire would be difficult to live. But it does transform desire. And I think

what it does is it puts you into touch with what you really want. Because most of our confusion arises from the fact that we don't know what we really want. And what meditation does, in quite a radical way of sorting and simplifying ourselves, is to put you back into touch with your basic need, which is your basic desire. Then joy springs up.

From a Buddhist point of view, the Buddhists say that 'the nature of all things is emptiness'. Now a lot of people say 'that's very negative; it's saying life is nothing.' That's a complete misinterpretation. As the Dalai Lama says, 'Emptiness is not nothingness.' What is emptiness? Emptiness is the insight – an insight is an experienced truth, it is not just an idea like 'God is good' or 'God is love', this is an experience, this is a spiritual experience – this is the insight experience that life is impermanent and it is interdependent. In other words, 'I do not exist alone.' Physically, psychologically, emotionally, in every possible way my being is interwoven with a great web of being – other people, the natural cycle of life, everything. So, that's one insight: it's impermanent. Well we know it's impermanent, look in the mirror and you'll see life is impermanent. We're changing. Our moods change, our bodies change, our thoughts change, the world changes around us. Now, you would think that facing that nature of reality, emptiness would be quite horrifying and that's probably why we don't want to face it, because we think this is terrifying, this is a nightmare – nothing lasts, and nothing really can be even said to exist by itself. And yet, as the Buddhist would say, when you have that insight into emptiness, the sign that you have really had it is joy. I think that's a universal spiritual wisdom. There's a Christian language for that which is 'poverty of spirit', which is the first of the Beatitudes. Jesus said, 'Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. (Mt 5:3)' That's emptiness, for poverty of spirit doesn't mean being miserable, having nothing, being negative. It means having that insight into the true nature of reality. ~

6

The Nature of God

In addiction you can say in a real sense you're losing yourself. Through the experience of loss, if you go right into it, you break through into something on the other side. And that on the other side is God. God is always more, always beyond.

In how many steps in the Twelve Steps* does the word 'God' appear?

STEP 2: *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. (It doesn't actually mention God.)*

STEP 3: *Turn our lives over to the care of God.*

STEP 5: *Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature...*

STEP 6: *Were ready to have God remove these defects of character.*

STEP 7: *Humbly asked Him, God, to remove our shortcomings.*

STEP 11: *Conscious contact with God as we understood God.*

So it's a pretty God-centred programme really, as we understand God.

I thought it would be interesting to look at what 'God' means. What does this word 'God' mean, and how does meditation as an experience tell us about this idea of God? One of the definitions of God by Nicolas of Cusa, 15th century (1401-1464), was: 'God is the reconciliation of opposites.' Let's just try to see how that might be experienced in life, say through the opposites of losing

and finding. Nothing could be more opposite than that.

There's a sequence of parables, descriptive stories that Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke, which are all about losing and finding. He was stimulated to give these by the disapproval that he found in the Pharisees and the lawyers who condemned him for spending too much time with sinners. Jesus was supposed to be this spiritual teacher, this rabbi, and why was he hanging out with tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners and all these people who were ritually impure and not kosher and just not respectable? He was attacked for that, and his response to it was these three stories.

There is a shepherd; he has a hundred sheep. He loses one sheep. He leaves the ninety-nine and goes in search of the one lost sheep. And when he finds the sheep he puts it on his shoulders, rejoicing, and comes back. He goes home to call his friends and neighbours together.

Rejoice with me, I have found my lost sheep! In the same way, I tell you,' Jesus says, 'there will be greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.' (Lk 15:3-7)

There's a lot of paradox in that. It seems to capture something of the spirit of the AA fellowship – the commitment to the individual.

The second image is a woman who has ten silver coins and she loses one of them. She lights a lamp, she sweeps out the house, and looks in every corner until she finds it.

When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me, I have found the coin that I lost.' In the same way I tell you there is joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Lk 15:8-10)

And then the third story which is the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32). So these are three parables.

Jesus taught mainly by parables because parables have to be interpreted. He didn't give rules and regulations – do this and

don't do that. He told stories, and the purpose of the stories is to raise our consciousness. So that is why parables are an ideal form of instruction, because each of us has to interpret these stories.

Let us just look at this theme of losing and finding, this paradox, these two opposites. He takes this very common, universal human experience of loss, and uses it to say something about God. The experience of loss has something in common. There is anger, confusion ('I don't know what to do'); there's pain ('this is something precious, important, valuable') – ache and pain, loss, absence, whether that is an object, or a person or a sense of direction in life in the sense of losing your way, as you say. Loss is a very powerful human experience. And nobody gets very far in life without coming into it. We all experience loss. Maybe it is loss of our hopes, or loss of our health, or loss of our youth, or loss of our partner, or loss of our relationships or whatever it is, loss of money, or status – all sorts of things we can lose.

And then the finding. In these stories, loss is followed by going out, looking for it, and what characterises the experience of finding is joy. I think this is important for the AA spirituality because, in the addiction there is a very deep experience of loss – self-worth, self-respect, freedom, wholeness, friendships, marriages, money, my soul and consciousness. There's a very major experience of loss in this addiction and it's an experience of loss that touches your material, financial, social, psychological, and your deepest ontological loss, spiritual identity. You can say in a real sense you're losing yourself. Loss is touching every aspect of yourself. Now, in recovery, when you find the programme, when you find this path, what are you finding? You are finding those things that you have lost before, I imagine. You are getting back a sense of self-worth, probably getting back into a balanced life with a job, some normality and responsibility, and reciprocity, and relationships and so on. Life is coming back. Those aspects of one's self that seemed to be lost forever are now somehow being restored, they are being found again.

And what characterises that finding of self? I think it's joy. And it's a joy maybe that was not there before. In the losing and in the finding, the third element, which is the transcendent element which I would say is the God bit, is the joy, because that wasn't there before. So there's a breakthrough. Through the experience of loss, if you go right into it, then you break through into something on the other side. And on the other side is God. God is always more, God is always beyond. ~

* The 12 Steps as defined by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA):

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings
8. Made a list of persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

If we accept this understanding of God that we see in the story of the Prodigal Son, that God is just pure, undiluted love, meditation then is about finding this God within ourselves. This love of God cannot reject us.

The experience of God is found, entered into, through losing and finding. And this experience of joy discovered in the finding *is* God. God *is* the joy. This is taken further in the third parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32).

There was once a man who had two sons. And the younger said to his father, 'Give me my share of the property.' So he divided his estate between them. A few days later the younger son turned the whole of his share into cash and left home for a distant country, where he squandered it in dissolute living.

What does this tell us about the father? What do we know so far about the father? He gave him his freedom. Obviously the father in this story is a symbol, a metaphor for God. God isn't controlling, in the ordinary sense of the word. This is the first sense that we have that God is love – 'you are my son, you are old enough to know what to do; you are a human being, you're not a puppet.'

He'd spent it all when a severe famine fell upon that country and he began to be in need.

So what stage of recovery is that? Awareness. This is also maybe a symbol for recovery from addiction; it is when he hits rock bottom. It is when the money runs out, your health collapses, you lose your job and friends.

So he went and attached himself to one of the local landowners who sent him onto his farm to mind the pigs. He would have been glad to fill his belly with the fodder the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.'

What is he feeling doing that job? Disgrace, rejection, dehumanised, humiliation,

Then he came to his senses. He says, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more food than they can eat? And here am I starving to death.'

What kind of mental postures is he exhibiting here? He sees a solution, and he's working out stages. Is he being rational? Yes. He's saying, 'Hey, why am I'm starving to death here? My father's wealthy, I'll go home.' Then he thinks: 'Now how am I going to get there?'

I'll go home and I'll say, 'Father, I've sinned against God and against you. I'm no longer fit to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'

So he wants to go back and make amends; he's worked out his strategy. We see recovery has started. He is putting his life back in shape, he's worked out his strategy, he sets out for his father's house,

But while he was still a long way off his father saw him and his heart went out to him. He ran to meet him, his son, flung his arms round him and kissed him.

Which is not what he or anyone else would have expected. So it's as if his father just couldn't restrain himself; he is just mastered by the joy of seeing his son come home, overwhelmed by joy. And just as we forget all the negative feelings we had in the experience of loss when we find what we've lost, so we never hear, in this story, we never hear any negative aspect of the father – never any anger or grief or resentment or anything. But if

there was any, he certainly had experienced loss. So then, what would you expect the son to do?

The son says, 'Father, I've sinned against God and against you and I am no longer fit to be called your son.'

So he came out with his little prepared speech. He prepared the speech because he thought he was going to have to deal with an angry father – our image of God, angry father. But in fact, what does he meet? A loving father, pure love. No resentment, not even a word of 'I told you so; you shouldn't have... but I'll take you back, but don't do it again.' Nothing of that, just sheer joy in finding – divine joy. And the son, the younger son, doesn't get it does he – yet, at all? He still thinks he has to come out with this self-justification, or excuse, to manipulate his father and win his father's approval and all that. He doesn't get it.

The father says to his servant, 'Quick fetch a robe, the best we have [the best we have]. Put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.' [So he's now reinstated into his former position.] 'Bring the fatted calf and kill it.' [So this is a big party, a big celebration.] 'Call in the neighbours and the friends. Let us celebrate with a feast. For this son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found.' And the festivities began.

Now you'd think that would be the end of the story. But now the second phase of the story begins with the elder son.

The elder son had been out on the farm. And on his way back as he approached the house he heard music and dancing. And a servant told him, 'Your brother has come home and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him back safe and sound., But he was angry and refused to go in.

The older son is another form of the ego. The younger son is

the ego that we most usually recognise in ourselves – the self-indulgent, the wayward, the pleasure-seeking ego. But this older son, his brother, is the other side of the ego, what is the negative ego – it's the ungenerous, it's the mean-spirited, it's the resentful. But the ego has both of these functions. 'And he was angry and refused to go in.' Now,

His father comes out and pleads with him.

So just as his father runs across the fields to meet the younger son coming home, so the father again shows no pride or dignity in going out, and pleads with his son. But he retorted, and this is the negative ego speaking to God:

You know how I have slaved for you all these years. I've never once disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me so much as a kid to celebrate with my friends. But now that this son of yours turns up after running through your money with his women, you kill the fatted calf for him.

So it comes pouring out, all the resentment bottled up. And then the father's sheer tenderness, even in the face of this ugly ego, this really ugly side of human personality,

'My boy,' said the father, 'you are always with me and everything I have is yours. How could we fail to celebrate this happy day? Your brother here was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and has been found.'

This is God. If anything expresses the nature of God, it is this story – through the same universal experience of losing and finding, but now we see it actually as it were from God's experience, as much as it is humanly possible to understand what God feels or sees. But this is the nature of God anyway. There is no resentment, no punishment, no condemnation at all, only the joy.

Our image of God somehow or other, despite 2,000 years of being in a culture that had presented this teaching to us, has rather stuck largely with an image of God which is an image of a

policeman, or a judge, or an executioner; somebody who is disapproving, somebody who will punish us because we have done wrong. There are all sorts of reasons for that – partly our religious education, partly our own self-judgment. It is we who do the judging and the blaming, not God. Sin does contain its own punishment, but God does not punish. We project our own elder-brother syndrome – the resentfulness and the self-hating – we project that onto our image of God and we form an image of God out of that. I think it's a psychological construction.

If we accept this understanding of God that we see in the story of the Prodigal Son, that God is not resentful, not even judgemental, but is just pure, undiluted, crazy love – I mean this is passionate love that is not sort of controlling itself – so if this is our image of God, this is how we can be open to God. Meditation then is about finding this God within ourselves.

Now what do we mean by *within* ourselves, it means *with* ourselves – in a relationship with ourselves that we cannot separate. And therefore in the Christian contemplative tradition in particular, it says *to know your self is to know God*. Self-knowledge leads to knowledge of God. It doesn't matter what you believe in that sense, when you begin to meditate. You only have to be open to yourself, and then find the God who is in indissoluble union with you, because this love of God cannot reject us. Just as the father in the story, he will let go, but cannot reject either of these children that he's got, who are so different from each other. ~

8

God is Love

The work of meditation is pure, simple, undiluted attention. The only way you can purify your image of God is to abandon all images of God. Once you've abandoned all the ideas of God, you're left with the final distillation of the whole of the bible, which is three words: 'God is Love.'

Meister Eckhart said,

I pray to God to rid me of God.

What we have to lose, if we are to do this, is any image of God that conflicts with this reality of God. The work of meditation is pure, simple, undiluted attention.

What are you paying attention to? You could say, if you like, I'm paying attention to God, but you're not thinking about God because to think about God would be to have an image of God in your mind. And that image is going to have some, maybe quite a lot, of your own ego in it, whether it is the ego of the younger son or the older son, probably the older son. So the only way you can purify your image of God is to abandon all images of God. And that actually is pure Christian mystical teaching.

St Gregory of Nyssa said,

Every image of God is an idol.

St Augustine said,

If you can understand it, it isn't God.

When Moses was trying to get a name out of God so that he could label God as one of the other many gods of the tribal deities, God said,

I am that I am. (Ex 3:14)

So BEING, pure being, pure presence.

And then once you've abandoned all the ideas of God, see what you're left with. Well, you're left with the final distillation of the whole of the bible, which is three words:

God is love. (1 Jn 4:8)

It is put very well in St John:

The love I speak of is not our love for God, but God's love for us. (1 Jn 4:10)

God loved us first. That is Step 1 where we open ourselves to that. Because we almost say to ourselves, 'I can't love God because I'm in such a divided state. I'm so controlled by this addiction, I cannot love myself, I cannot love God, I can't love anyone.' So what's the point of recovery, the starting point? That *God loved us first*. Then we build up again from there. ~

What is Sin?

Sin is not the breaking of a rule. Sin is the divided self, the state of self-alienation. St Paul describes it in graphic terms: 'What I want to do, I do not do. What I do not want to do, that is what I end up doing.' And the law cannot get to the root of the problem. Grace heals the wounds of the human soul, not punishment.

What is sin? It is very important we understand sin, because the opposite of sin is God. If our idea of sin is wrong, then our idea of God is going to be wrong as well.

So what is sin? The great breakthrough of the gospel is, in a sense, an understanding of the nature of sin and of the nature of God. Our conventional idea of sin is the breaking of a divinely made rule – it's going against God's will, it's doing something that God says we shouldn't do, even though most rules that we apply to God are socially conditioned morality. And if we break these rules we should expect to be punished, just as if you break the speed limit you expect to be fined or lose your points on your license. But that's a legalisation of sin.

St Paul was the most fanatical, fundamentalist, intolerant religious bigot you could imagine, before his conversion. He was persecuting the Christians, and convinced that he was defending God and the religion and the law. Then he had his experience, his white light experience, and it took him quite a few years of recovery after that to get back on his feet. He didn't just suddenly become a Christian, you know, and go around preaching the gospel. It took him several years in the desert, and he lost his sight, he was blind, he was handicapped and he couldn't get around. What was his insight? What restored his sight? You see it in Chapters 6 to 8 of the Letter to the Romans. And in that he deals with the question of sin and the law.

And basically what he's saying is, the law is useful, we need certain rules and regulations, certain guidelines, but the law does not solve the problem of sin. Because sin is not the breaking of a rule, it's not a legal offence. It's made into a legal offence if we get hung up on the law, which is meant just to control things. But sin itself is not a legal matter. Sin is the divided self. Sin is the state of self-alienation. And he describes it in graphic terms. He says, 'What I want to do, I do not do. What I do not want to do, that is what I end up doing.' (Rom 7:15)

A description of addiction, isn't it? This is sin, this is sin. The state of self-division, self-contradiction, unless it is dealt with or healed or repaired in some way, will destroy us, rip us apart. Because sin is such a painful state of division to be in, we invoke the law to try to deal with it. And the law cannot get to the root of the problem. It can deal with the symptoms maybe, can give you the self-righteousness of fulfilling the law, which becomes a kind of a substitute for real goodness, but it doesn't take away the fundamental wound of self-division. Where did it come from? Why are we in it? We don't know, but it's there.

And then his second great insight is that where sin is, grace abounds all the more. And this is a huge breakthrough: where sin is, there is grace in abundance. The more sin, the more grace. This is a completely different conception of the relationship between the sinful human condition and God than we had imagined before. So, it is not the law or punishment that is going to cure sin, but grace. What is grace? Grace is self-giving – one person to another. Grace is that attention that we receive from another person.

Addiction is simply sinful behaviour, or it's a manifestation of sin. Sin itself is this mysterious, tragic flaw in our human condition – the divided self. But where does this flaw come from, where does this division come from? The myth is that it was disobedience. But what does disobedience mean? If we hadn't been disobedient we wouldn't have grown up, we would never have left home. There has to be separation. And the ego has to form, and it forms very early of course, and the purpose of the

ego is to differentiate – the ‘terrible two’s you know, when your children said, ‘no, no, no’. So wherever it comes from, the self-division is the root of the problem.

This conception of sin can only be sustained if you have truly this image of God that we have in the story of the Prodigal Son. If the father doesn’t blame the son, why should we blame ourselves where grace is the response to sin?

In other words, grace heals the wound of the human soul – only grace, love, gift, freedom, generosity – not punishment. ~

Meditation and the 12-Step Program

Meditation helps by taking us through our desires as we take our attention off all our images. It's not easy to do that because you will feel that you're losing something. And yet, in meditation we choose to lose. And that free choice opens us to grace in abundance.

In what way does meditation help us to recover, to try again, to keep trying again? And what happens when you are aiming at a target, you keep missing the mark? As you get better you get closer to the bull's eye. And then one day you hit the bull's eye. It's great! What do you feel? You don't feel proud – you feel relief, luck, good. You can't guarantee you're going to hit the bull's eye every time. But you know you're getting better, and that's what the 12-Step Program is about – getting better, not perfect, but continually getting better.

That's what the spiritual life is about or what recovery's about. In the alcoholic experience we see this in a particularly focused way through the experience of alcohol and addiction. But it's the same thing. It's life isn't it? It's the human condition, dramatised through the bottle but it's the same thing.

How does meditation help? It's clearly part of the programme – the 11th Step, 'prayer and meditation'. It's the step before the last step which leads to altruism, towards giving yourself to others. In other words, it's the step before *you* become the channels of grace to others in need. Because you have received grace, because you've been healed through grace, not through punishment (self-punishment or otherwise), you then become the channels of grace to others in need. That's what every AA meeting is about.

Meditation helps by taking us through our desires, a process

of transforming our desires if you like, purifying our desires, transforming through a radical therapy – the radical therapy of purifying the imagination. And it's radical as we take our attention off all our images. It's not easy to do that because you will feel that you're losing something. Now, in the meditation, you are losing; nobody likes to lose. The experience of loss is very painful and unpleasant. And yet, in meditation we *choose* to lose, and it's the free choice to lose, or in the AA language 'to let go', because that's what losing is. Voluntary losing is letting go.

And that choice opens us to grace in abundance. And that's why meditation fits in to all the steps of the programme. It doesn't matter where you start. I think you could start to meditate at any stage, any step, on the 12-Step Program. Every step is about God – explicitly or implicitly. ~

Where sin is, there is grace in abundance. The more sin, the more grace. This is a completely different conception of the relationship between the sinful human condition and God than we had imagined before. So, it is not the law or punishment that is going to cure sin, but grace. Grace heals the wound of the human soul, not punishment.

These talks present meditation as a simple way to gain freedom from addiction. Compulsive behaviour develops when our search for happiness becomes fixated on a single desire that brings temporary satisfaction. In meditation, we shift our attention from our desires and place it on the mantra. This gentle discipline opens us to the work of grace, which restores us to wholeness.



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