



Attention

by Kim Nataraja

Paying one-pointed attention to your word is the essence of meditation. John Main always stressed: 'Just say your word.' That is all that is needed. But as you well know the mind just keeps on going off on its day dreams, keeps on worrying or planning. Hence the importance of our word, our aid to help us focus one-pointedly.

There is an Indian story that illustrates the usefulness of aids to focussing:

Elephants are not as peaceful, wise and well behaved as often portrayed. If uncontrolled they will walk any which way, knocking over things on their path. Whenever possible their mischievous trunk will pick up what it can – bananas, mangoes, anything tempting on all the roadside stalls.

Those who train elephants, the mahouts, are very aware of this fact and when they have to take an elephant through the crowded streets in a religious or marriage procession, they have two ways of controlling the elephant's behaviour. First they dress him in a special way with decorations and a seat on his back, making him feel important. This encourages the elephant to walk in a careful and measured way. Secondly they give his mischievous trunk a stick to hold on to and the elephant proudly holds on to this and is not tempted in any way to pick up tasty morsels.

Our mind is really like this elephant: if like the mahout we tell our mind that we are doing something very important and we give it something to hold on to like a mantra, we make the seemingly impossible possible. If we accept the wayward nature of our mind and develop strategies to deal with it rather than getting irritated and cross, it too is not so tempted to follow its own inclinations and fancies and is less inclined to wander off.

Attention and prayer are inextricably linked: "When attention seeks prayer it finds it. For it there is anything that marches in the train of attention it is prayer, and so it must be cultivated." (Evagrius)

In the Gospel of Mark (13:33-37) Jesus tells us: "Be alert, be wakeful. You do not know when the moment comes. " We don't know at what stage of our meditation the Spirit will take over and lead us into the stream of love between Christ and the Creator. But we won't be aware of her promptings, if we are still caught in our own thoughts rather than repeating our prayer word in loving trust without any expectations: 'Your Father knows what your needs are before you ask him.'

The beauty of children's unconditional love and trust and their wonderful ability to be totally absorbed in whatever they are doing is an attitude we need to recover. "I tell you this: unless you turn around and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matt 18:1-4) A total absorption in our word is needed to bring us into the Divine Presence: