



The importance of preparation

by Kim Nataraja

We know from experience that to meditate is not easy. And we make it even more difficult for ourselves by expecting to be able to switch off and delve into the silence, immediately after having been busy talking on the phone, listening to the radio or watching television. We hear Cassian stress that: 'For whatever our soul was thinking about before the time of prayer inevitably occurs to us when we pray as a result of the operation of the memory.' We need therefore to insert a period of quietening down, to create a pocket of external silence, especially running up to our period of meditation in the evening. He continues, saying that 'Hence we must prepare ourselves before the time of prayer to be the prayerful persons that we wish to be.' That is the essence: we need to be a 'prayerful person' not only in the period preceding our meditation and during our meditation but in daily life as a whole. This implies a different attitude to life, simplifying our needs and desires, in other words simplifying our life in general, so that nothing distracts us and takes our attention away from the Divine.

Apart from the above, another essential preparation for deep silent prayer is interior purification, aiming at what the Desert Fathers and Mothers called 'purity of heart'. For Cassian, as for his teacher Evagrius, spiritual practice very much involves the purification of 'evil thoughts' or as they also put it 'cleansing the emotions'. By this they meant purifying one's ego-centric desires, the disordered emotions caused by the wounded ego. Evagrius' advice to his disciples is to redirect, educate and transfigure these desires through awareness, so that they would no longer be at the mercy of disproportioned emotions, which clouded their perception of reality and prevented them from seeing the Divine. Thomas Merton explains: 'What the fathers sought most of all was their own true self in Christ. And in order to do this, they had to reject completely the false, formal self fabricated under social compulsion in the 'world'.' Meditation is the key: it leads us to insights as to how our woundedness manifests itself in our compulsive needs: our greed, our envy, our desire for esteem, power and control. Meditation is our most important weapon, as it attracts the Holy Spirit, who 'takes compassion on our weakness, and though we are impure he often comes to visit us. If he should find our spirit praying to him out of love for the truth he then descends upon it and dispels the whole army of thoughts and reasoning that besets it.' (Evagrius) Prayer/meditation therefore naturally leads to transformation and healing of the wounded ego.

As always the teaching of the Desert Fathers and Mothers was soundly based on Scripture. Jesus stresses that it is our thoughts, our 'evil' thoughts that stop us for living in the Presence of God: 'Wicked thoughts...all proceed from the heart; and these are the things that defile a man.' He stresses that it is interior purification that is needed: 'Clean the inside of the cup first; then the outside will be clean also.' At the same time we are told that when we do persevere, 'the door will be opened.' (Matt 7:8) We will become aware of the divine Presence in our heart.