



Purifying the Emotions

by Kim Nataraja

We have seen the importance of the virtues of repentance and humility for our spiritual growth. But there are strong ego-centric emotions that can block any progress. In one of his most popular works 'Praktikos' Evagrius, the 4th Century Desert Father par excellence and teacher of Cassian, deals mainly with this major difficulty: "The ascetic life is the spiritual method for cleansing the affective part of the soul." Although Evagrius was addressing the problems of the ascetics in his care in the Egyptian desert, his advice is psychologically so sound that it also very much applies to ordinary people like us who are seriously on the spiritual path.

Evagrius uses the term 'demons' for the overpowering ego-centric desires that can fuel our behaviour and keep us focussed exclusively on the material world. Modern men and women may be slightly put out by the use of this term, but he is referring to strong self-centred emotions, which are the outcome of deep instinctive survival needs for security, power, control and esteem that have not been met. The 'ego' is our survival instinct; we need it and it is valuable - it is a gift from God. We need this instinct to deal with the dangers of the environment in which we find ourselves; our survival needs have to be fulfilled to a healthy degree. But if they are perceived to be unmet, especially from early childhood onwards, we need to become aware of how these natural desires can be distorted and grow out of proportion into forces which unconsciously demonically drive our behaviour. Then, Evagrius warns, they need to be purified back to their natural state of balance.

Our task according to him is to identify our personal demons. This we do by prayer/meditation - by calling on spiritual powers to help us - and by effort to come to self-knowledge and awareness, which is achieved by watching the thoughts. Evagrius is not asking us to watch the usual trivial junk that floats over the surface of our mind. That would be pointless and excruciatingly boring. He is concerned about the deep thoughts that are expressions of our unmet needs and unpurified desires. We need to pay these significant thoughts and their associations the attention they deserve. They are the only indicators we have of what really motivates us for good or for ill. Yet this work we do is not just for ourselves; by purifying our own emotions, by being healed of our own woundedness, the stream of pure love that flows through our true self is unhindered with the result of that we are open and compassionate towards others.

Yes, sometimes life is indeed all about surviving. Yet even in the most appalling circumstances we find people who ignore the danger to themselves and act with integrity, love and compassion. Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Mystic who died in a Nazi concentration camp in the Second World War, showed support and loving comfort to all, who were there with her, as she saw the Divine essence within everyone: "But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that piece of You, God, in ourselves..... You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last. ('An Interrupted Life')

The aim of our meditation practice is not to get rid of the 'ego' but to open the 'ego' to the healing power of the Spirit, which helps us to get in touch with 'that piece of You, God'.