



Perserverance

by Kim Nataraja

Closely linked to the Benedictine vow of 'Conversion' is the vow of 'Stability'. Benedict was very aware that the continual conversion, the constant turning to the Divine in prayer and in life required on the spiritual path, was a difficult and often discouraging process. He therefore stressed the virtue of 'stability', by which he meant first and foremost the quality of perseverance, a rootedness in the tradition and in the practice.

What do we do, when we feel reluctant to meditate? What do we do, when we feel afraid to let go of control? What do we do, when we feel a failure in meditation, because nothing ever happens? The virtue of 'Stability' teaches us the following: we just sit down at the usual time and say our word. We persevere with our practice regardless of what happens or doesn't happen. We faithfully sit and say our mantra without expecting anything.

The beauty is that something is happening, but at a level beyond our surface personality; the real change is taking place in our deep centre. We are not aware of it, as it is beyond our rational consciousness. If we just let it be and trust, meditation allows a conversion of heart, a shift of emphasis from the surface self to our true self in Christ.

Benedict was very influenced by the teaching of the Desert Fathers and Mothers through John Cassian. This boredom, this aridity, this 'what is the point?', which requires the antidote of stability, was also known to them. They called this paralysing emotion the 'Demon of Acedia':

The demon of acedia-also called the noonday demon- is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk [the meditator] about the fourth hour [10 a.m.] and besieges the soul until the eighth hour [2.00 p.m.]. First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out of the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour [3.00 p.m. the only meal of the day] to look now this way and now to that to see if perhaps one of the brethren appears from his cell. Then too he instils in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labour [a hatred for meditation]. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from amongst the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone who happens to offend him in some way or other this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred. This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life's necessities more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and his former way of life. He depicts life, stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind's eye the toil of the ascetic struggle [meditation practice] and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight. No other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he is defeated) but only a state of deep peace and inexpressible joy arise out of this struggle.

We recognise so many of the feelings expressed here: time is crawling; no one has a word of encouragement; I am not achieving anything; it is so difficult to sit still; how boring to just repeat our word; wouldn't it be better just to read a book about meditation and spirituality? Wouldn't a walk in nature be just as good? But the message is very clear, don't let the 'demon' win, persevere and peace will reign.