



Achievement or Grace?

by Kim Nataraja

In the third letter we met the 'Demon of Acedia'. As we have seen one of the ways we can defeat this 'Demon' is through perseverance in meditation/prayer regardless, but this is difficult. Even St Antony of the Desert, the inspiring example for the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th century, was faced with the same problem:

"When the holy Abba Antony lived in the desert he was beset by acedia and attacked by many sinful thoughts. He said to God, 'Lord, I want to be saved but these thoughts do not leave me alone; what shall I do in my affliction? How can I be saved?' A short while afterwards, when he got up to go out, Antony saw a man like himself sitting at his work, getting up from his work to pray, then sitting down again and plaiting a rope, then getting up to pray again. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct him and reassure him. He heard the angel say to him, 'Do this and you will be saved.' At these words, Antony was filled with joy and courage. He did this, and he was saved."

This in time became the background to the Benedictine way of life: 'ora et labora', work interspersed by regular set times of prayer. It is easy to see what lesson this has for us meditators, namely not to give in to the temptation to sit down to meditate for long periods at a time at the expense of the rest of your life. It is better, especially in the beginning, to follow the discipline of sitting down twice - or if your life makes this possible three times a day - at regular moments for a limited time - 30 minutes; in fact interrupt your daily life with prayer.

Often when we start to meditate we become very aware of the benefits and are tempted to stay for longer and longer periods of time. The temptation to strive to become a spiritual athlete is always there. But if we do so, soon we lay ourselves open to the 'Demon of Acedia'. Perhaps we don't have the same sense of peace afterwards as we did have. But who is striving and who is disappointed? Who is it that is prompting you to do this? Who likes to achieve? Who even tempts us to seek the esteem of others? The answer is obvious to all of us. It is that part of our consciousness that helps us to survive in this world, that part that deals with the material reality, in which we find ourselves: the 'ego'. But by following the 'ego's' promptings like this we fall victim in a way to the three main 'demons' Evagrius, the foremost Desert Father, distinguished: Greed, Seeking Esteem and Pride.

But meditation is about 'leaving self behind', leaving behind these desires of the 'ego'; only by doing so we can discover who we truly are, 'a child of God'. There may well be times, when we are touched by the grace of God and we are no longer aware that we were praying, but these are gifts of the Spirit not our achievements.