



Work and Pray

by Kim Nataraja

To work and pray was the way for the Desert Fathers and Mothers to arrive at ceaseless prayer: “He prays unceasingly who combines prayer with necessary duties and necessary duties with prayer. Only in this way can we find it practicable to fulfil the commandments to pray always. It consists in regarding the whole of Christian existence as a single great prayer. What we are accustomed to call prayer is only a part of it.” (Origen – ‘On Prayer’)

It is important to call to mind that whether in the Egyptian Desert or in the Monasteries the monastics were totally self-sufficient; the monks and nuns grew their own food, looked after the building, the health and welfare of the brothers and sisters and the lay community that surrounded them. The Desert Fathers and Mothers also worked for a living; they made ropes, wove mats and baskets, made sandals, which they then sold in the market to buy the absolute necessities for life. Some would work in the fields as day labourers in the fertile Nile valley or be involved in flax weaving. Even guests would be set to work after a period of grace of a week. They frowned on those who used prayer as an excuse not to work: “Some monks came to see Abba Lucius and they said to him, ‘We do not work with our hands; we obey Paul’s command and pray without ceasing’. The old man said, ‘Do you not eat or sleep?’ They said, ‘Yes, we do.’ He said, ‘Who prays for you while you are asleep? Excuse me, brothers, but you do not practise what you claim. I will show you how I pray without ceasing, though I work with my hands. With God’s help, I collect a few palm-leaves and sit down and weave them, saying, ‘Have mercy upon me, O God, after thy great goodness; according to the multitude of thy mercies, do away with mine offences.’ He said to them, ‘Is this prayer or not?’ They said, ‘Yes, it is.’ And he continued, ‘When I have worked and prayed in my heart all day, I make about sixteen pence. Two of these I put outside my door and with the rest I buy food. And he who finds the two coins outside the door prays for me while I eat and sleep. And so by the help of God I pray without ceasing.’

Every one of us in the modern world can combine work and prayer by meditating, which does lead to ceaseless prayer: “We usually begin by saying the mantra....but as we make progress...we find less effort is required to persevere in saying it throughout the time of our meditation. Then it seems that we are not so much speaking it in our minds as sounding it in our heart....It is at this moment that our meditation is really beginning...instead of saying or sounding the mantra, we begin to listen to it, wrapped in ever-deepening attention. (John Main ‘Word into Silence’)

From then on even outside our period of meditation we are aware of the mantra sounding in our being regardless of what we do. When it suddenly gets quiet at work we hear the mantra sounding in our being; when we wake up at night, there it is. It is our anchor in the midst of the storms of life.