



Obedience

by Kim Nataraja

The first of the Benedictine vows is 'obedience'. The root of this word is the Latin *ob-audiens*, meaning 'to listen intently'. The Desert Christians were obedient, listened intently: to God, to the commandments, which in the Desert meant the Beatitudes, and to their Abba or Amma, spiritual father or mother: "One of the Elders said that God asks two kind of obedience of the monks and nuns: that they obey the Holy Scripture, and obey their spiritual fathers and Mothers."

The aim of this deep listening is to silence the promptings of the 'ego', our own will, and learn to listen to the 'still small voice' within our deepest being, God's will for us. Obedience is therefore closely linked with both the virtues of poverty and humility, knowing your need of God and being aware of your own limitations.

The essence of meditation is also intent listening, listening to our mantra sounding itself in our being. Remember what John Main said, "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')

By silencing our thoughts by paying one-pointed attention and letting go of our conditioned images, both often products of our emotional woundedness, we transcend our 'ego', the conscious part of our being. Then we can over time let our true self, the Divine spark within us, permeate our thoughts and our deeds. It is this one-pointed attention that is the essence of prayer, as Evagrius underlines: "When attention seeks prayer it finds it. For if there is anything that marches in the train of attention it is prayer, and so it must be cultivated."

The same attention was to be paid to Scripture. It was still largely an oral culture in the 4th century and Scripture was read out at the weekly gatherings – the synaxis. Paying attention was essential: "The Elder said: 'Where were your thoughts, when we were saying the synaxis, that the word of the psalm escaped you? Don't you know that you are standing in the presence of God and speaking to God?'"

After having heard Scripture the Desert monastics would go to their cell and repeat one or two verses that had particularly struck them. They would not reflect on the meaning – that is a modern practice – but interiorize the words and let the words speak to them personally. This might then lead to prayer and to contemplation – being in the silent presence of God. This discipline became the 'Lectio Divina' of the Benedictine tradition – *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*. The repetition of the holy words leads to the silence of true contemplation. This is really part and parcel of the discipline of meditation as taught by John Main and Laurence Freeman. "We need to read Scripture, savour Scripture and let Scripture read us.", as Laurence Freeman put it and then let it influence the way we lead our lives