

## CHAPTER XI MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION

Meditation and contemplation deserve special consideration because of their importance in opening oneself to awareness of God and cooperation with God's participation in life. Though the two terms are often used interchangeably, one should use them with care in order to make a distinction between two approaches that are closely related but different. Meditation seeks relationship with God through the use of symbols (words and images) while contemplation relates to God without the medium of symbols. A simple analogy is that meditation is like being present with a friend, using words and visual observation as part of the communication, while contemplation is like being with the friend in silence, not even visually focusing on the friend, but being aware of the friend's presence. With a good friend one can do this. Thus contemplation has often been regarded as a "higher" stage than meditation, for one no longer actively engages in communication and what is to be communicated (e.g., God) reveals itself to one in a somewhat "passive" state. John of the Cross also speaks of the movement from meditation to contemplation as mediated by a "dark night of the senses" where images no longer satisfy as they once did, and one now has to move on to a deeper relationship.

It is my understanding that relationship with God is a gift given at the beginning of the relationship and that one does not grow closer or use methods which bring one closer, but the methods help one realize what has already been given. Whatever the extent of our realization, we are all the same in God's gift and God's eyes. It is important to avoid elitism. I do not believe that contemplation as a method is better than meditation. We should all use the methods which seem appropriate for us. I have known persons gifted in meditation and persons gifted in contemplation who did not move through meditation to contemplation. I do believe that both methods should be explored and do recognize, as St. John of the Cross indicated, that those who meditate may after a while find it less fulfilling and may need to explore contemplation.

Meditation may focus on symbols external to the self or internal, within the mind. For example objects within nature or religious symbols may be objects of meditation. One might use a flower or a beautiful scene, a cross, a painting, a piece of music or the words of a text. Or one may create images within the imagination, such as in the reliving of a biblical story. Contemplation usually seeks to eliminate foci within the world and within oneself, emphasizing the stilling of the mind and elimination of images and thoughts. Contemplation will occasionally use objects on which to focus the attention, but will do so in ways to keep the mind from wandering to other things. Sometimes religious images, such as icons, will be used to empty the mind so that one may move through and beyond the icon to God: the icon is not the focus of the attention. Both meditation and contemplation have received some attention in the chapter on "The Presence of God," and meditation has been discussed in the chapter on "Spiritual Reading of Scripture," which is one of the most frequent forms of meditation.

### **Meditation**

There has been a deep suspicion of the imagination at various time in Christianity because of its subjective nature, though one can easily indicate that the use of the imagination is legitimized in the New Testament by the early telling of the stories of Jesus and the creation of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist to dramatize the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ for the believer. In addition there are dreams and visions mentioned in the New Testament, with the special flowering of images in the book of Revelation. The great mystical streams which have always struggled to the surface of Christian

life have not always been readily accepted. Most of the mystics found opposition within the Christian establishment during their time even though they were later canonized. Protestant Christianity, particularly the Reformed tradition, with its focus upon the Bible, the preached word, and theological systems, for a time rejected images. Conservative Christianity today is frequently anxious about anything subjective which might be a departure from the word of God, though making extensive use of verbal images considered to be biblical and calling for feeling and conversion.

One of the concerns is that in "subjective" religion the psyche of the believer participates in the experience and that one cannot always tell what is of God and what is from oneself. There are two answers to this. One is that the revelation of oneself within the imagination provides important discoveries of the dynamics of one's own life, of which one should be aware. They operate whether one is aware or not. The second is that nothing is exempted from subjectivity: not Biblical interpretation, theological reflection, churchly tradition, church leaders or the Christian community. All of life is colored by subjectivity. One has only to look at the history of Christianity to see various subjectivities at work, some of them claiming to be absolute truth.

The subjectivity of the imagination is one of the ways in which faith and personality become interwoven and the objects of our faith become personal. It is a fruitful tool. As Morton Kelsey says:

The key that unlocks the door to the inner world is imagination . . . but this kind of imagination does far more than simply provide information. Images give us a way of thinking that brings us closer to actual experiences of the spiritual world than any concept or merely verbal idea about that realm.<sup>511</sup>

Imagination may be *active*. One may create images, feed in information into the developing imaged experience, and also actively participate in it, becoming part of the story or scene. Or it may be *passive*, the person perhaps providing the mind with some suggestions but allowing it and the experience to shape its own images and unfold its own story, much as in a dream.

There are some cautions that one should exercise. *First*, it is important that one be rooted in a sound understanding of the Christian faith so that this can be a guide in the subjectivity of the imaginative experience. *Secondly*, it is important to think of what we have been taught about God and Christ and how we might expect this to affect our imagination. If we have been taught that Christ is harsh and judgmental, that Christ will at times appear within the imagination. The taught subjectivities of our religious traditions can at times create as much difficulty for us as the subjectivities which arise out of our own life history. I have led meditations in which two Christs appeared, one from the biblical story and a very frightening one from the person's childhood learnings about Christ. *Thirdly*, it is important to recognize that the techniques of meditation, and contemplation, lower the threshold of one's unconscious so that unconscious materials emerge. This is a valuable part of the experience, but persons who sense danger as they let down the barriers or who suffer from emotional disorder ought not to engage in this without supervision. There needs to be a relatively stable self to enter these experiences so that as the experience unfolds there is someone to resume control if this is necessary. This means that a strong ego is a great help, even though one moves it "off center" in these experiences, or there should be the presence of another who can assume responsibility for regaining control when necessary.

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<sup>511</sup>. Morton T. Kelsey, *The Other Side of Silence: A Guide to Christian Meditation*, NY: Paulist Press, 1976, p. 178.

Imagination does not function the same in every one. This receives discussion in the chapter on "Psychological Models." Some persons easily see images, some only see vague shapes, others may hear only words. One has to use one's imagination according to one's individual characteristics, though there are also various ways of training the imagination.

One very interesting example of the use of the imagination is the 16th century *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* which grew out of Ignatius' own spiritual experience and discipline. They are divided into four sections, each section to take a week in the longer form of the exercises. They may be taken in a shorter form of about 8 days.

1. First week -- consideration and contemplation of sin
2. Second week -- the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, up to and including Palm Sunday
3. Third week -- the Passion of Christ our Lord
4. Fourth week -- the Resurrection and Ascension, and the Three Methods of Prayer

One can readily see that its purpose is to prepare the person for Christ and draw the story of Christ's life into the believer's. Ignatius states that the exercises are "methods of preparing and disposing the soul to free itself of all inordinate attachments, and after accomplishing this, of seeking and discovering the Divine Will regarding the disposition of one's life, thus insuring the salvation of his soul." The accomplishing of this is to be the work of God and Christ and not the leader. In words which are appropriate to all spiritual directors he says: ". . . in these Spiritual Exercises it is much better and more fitting in seeking the Divine Will, that our Lord and Saviour should communicate Himself to the devout soul, inflaming it with His love and praise, and disposing it to the way in which it can best serve Him in the future. Thus, the one who gives the Exercises should not lean either to one side or the other, but standing in the middle like the balance of a scale, he should allow the Creator to work directly with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and God."<sup>512</sup>

In the First Exercise of the First Week instruction is given on the use of the imagination:

"It should be noted at this point that when the meditation or contemplation is on a visible object, for example, contemplating Christ our Lord during His life on earth, the image will consist of seeing with the mind's eye the physical place where the object that we wish to contemplate is present. By the physical place I mean, for instance, a temple, or mountain where Jesus or the Blessed Virgin is, depending on the subject of the contemplation. In meditations on subject matter that is not visible, as here in meditation on sins, the mental image will consist of imagining, and considering my soul imprisoned in its corruptible body, and my entire being in this vale of tears as an exile among brute beasts. By entire being I mean both body and soul." <sup>513</sup>

In the Fifth Contemplation of the Second Week he provides instruction in the application of the five senses:

"The first point is to see the persons in my imagination, contemplating and meditating in detail the circumstances surrounding them, and I will then draw some spiritual profit from this scene. The second point is to hear what they are saying, or what they might say, and I will reflect within myself to draw some fruit from what I have heard.

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<sup>512</sup>. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, transl. by Anthony Mottola, NY: Image Books, Doubleday, 1964, pp. 37, 40-41. Books are available to help those using the exercises, such as Marian Cowan, John Carroll Futrell, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola: A Handbook for Directors*, NY: Le Jacq Pub., 1982.

<sup>513</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

The third point is to smell and taste in my imagination the infinite fragrance and sweetness of the Divinity, and of the soul, and of its virtues, and of all else, according to the character of the person I am now contemplating. And I will reflect within myself to draw spiritual profit therefrom.

The fourth point is to use in imagination the sense of touch, for example, by embracing and kissing the place where the persons walk or sit, always endeavoring to draw some spiritual fruit from this." 514

Each Exercise has somewhat the following form:

- Preparatory Prayer
- Several Preludes -- to imaginatively set the scene for the meditation
- Several Points -- the foci of the meditation
- A colloquy -- where the matters are imaginatively discussed with Christ, God, and at times with Mary. This is closed with the Lord's Prayer.

To the Exercises is added "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits" so that the "movements that are produced in the soul" may be evaluated and understood; "Rules Concerning Scruples" so that one's conscience is not over-sensitive; and "Rules for Thinking With the Church" to subordinate the individualism which might come out of meditation and the exercises to the Church. At the end of the Second Week detailed information is given on "Making A Choice of A Way of Life", to which the Exercises are designed to lead. Here if there is neither clear guidance from God nor clear understanding of the matter, then a process is advised which also begins with the imagination: "To place before my mind's eye the thing on which I wish to make a choice." The individual remains neutral and asks God to move the will and reveal to his/her spirit what should be done to promote God's praise and glory. Other methods suggested are imagining another person whom one would advise about such a matter as that in question and then taking one's own advice, and imagining oneself at the point of death or at the final judgment. 515

### **Meditation on the Baptism of Jesus**

What follows is a meditation on the story of Jesus' Baptism. The rationale for its design and the meditation itself are presented in enough detail so that it can be used by others and provide a pattern for the development of other meditations. There is an important difference between meditating oneself and leading others in meditation. One who leads others must always carefully consider what one is suggesting, for the suggestions of the leader often operate much like hypnotic suggestion. In order to counteract this effect, the persons who are led should be told that they are in control of what they allow to happen in the experience, that they are free to drop out or not to follow suggestions at any time, and the meditation itself should be designed to allow this freedom. Talking over the intention of the meditation with the group ahead of time is important, especially if one is unfamiliar with the group, so that concerns might surface before the meditation is conducted. To illustrate the type of problems that could exist, I remember one woman who in the preparatory session said that she did not wish to participate because she was not ready to be baptized, something the meditation called for. Another person was deathly afraid of water, having nearly drowned, and to have forced her into the water to share the experience of Jesus' baptism would have been devastating to her. Some concerns can be resolved by discussion, as was the first case, while in cases such as the woman who nearly drowned it is better not to try to resolve such a profound fear in such

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514. Ibid., p. 72.

515. Ibid., pp. 129ff.

a short time. The woman could participate in the meditation without going into the water herself or she could drop out completely, which she did.

Purpose:

The purpose of the meditation is to help persons to understand and to identify with the experience of Jesus in his Baptism and to relate this to their own experience of God. The Baptism is understood as a time when Jesus, called by the immediate presence of God proclaimed by John the Baptist (the nearness of the Kingdom which asked repentance-*metanoia*), left behind his earlier life, submitted to John's baptism, received an awareness of the presence of God (the Spirit) and received his identity ("Thou art my beloved Son").

Outline and Description of Method:

1. Entrance Process to lead to relaxation and meditative state.
2. Imaginative portrayal of scene and event of Jesus' Baptism.
3. Imaginative experience of one's own baptism by John.
4. Dialogue with Jesus about one's experience.
5. Exit Process.

In use of the imagination one might completely portray the scene and determine the experience -- down to small details -- or one might suggest elements of the experience and scene and allow those meditating to fill in the details so that their experience becomes quite "personal", the details being supplied by their own subconscious and God's interaction with them at the time. It was decided to suggest basic elements of the scene and allow individuals to fill in the details, to be quite specific about what this event meant to Jesus so as to give a definite context in which persons could have their own experience, to only suggest the basic framework of their baptism by John so that this experience could be highly personal, and to only suggest their dialogue with Jesus but suggest none of its contents so that this also could be highly personal. It would also be suggested that persons feel a measure of freedom to pursue individual directions of experience should that materialize.

I do not prefer doing meditations in which all details are determined and suggested because this readily becomes manipulation by the leader and allows little space for the experience to become a personal event between God, the person and the text. Enough content or detail would be supplied to keep the experience focused and to give persons a basis from which the experience could be developed in their own imagination.

Because the meditative state is a state of high suggestibility and since this might be the first experience of some with meditation, there should be a concern to help persons understand the nature of the experience, their freedom to opt out and not move along with suggestions if they experience real resistance. There should also be adequate suggestion in the words used by the leader that this would be a good and positive experience, an experience in which God and Christ would be close to them, and that they would come out of the experience feeling good and relaxed and refreshed. Sometimes the experience may be disturbing, especially if the person has something in his/her life that needs to be dealt with. That can be dealt with afterwards. Negative experiences should never be suggested because of the power of the suggestion itself. People will sometimes comment after experience with both meditation and contemplation, that while contemplation is deeply restful, meditation may not be. This is

because in meditation one is engaged in a process of the imagination and the personal interactions with this process may produce some tension and uncomfortable insights. Even so, this should not be suggested, but discussed when it is observed.

The leader of a meditation should keep in mind place and pace. The place should be quiet and as free from distraction as possible. If disturbances occur they can be anticipated and explained beforehand or dealt with as they occur during the meditation. For example, if there is a ticking clock in the room, explain that as they go into the meditation and relax the sound of the clock will undoubtedly become louder. They should just allow it to be part of the background of sounds and do not need to focus attention on it or try to eliminate it. I also indicate that if someone should fall asleep and snore (which does happen), it is not necessary to give their attention to this and they can go on with the meditation. If a baby cries or there is some noise in the next room, that can often be incorporated into the scene that is part of the meditation. In this way you are giving permission not to be concerned about or try to solve sounds that may intrude.

As to pace, it is important to present or read the meditation slowly enough to allow what is being suggested to occur. At times there will need to be pauses when an event is suggested which will take some time. The pace, however, ought not to be so slow that the attention or concentration of the participants is lost. Experience will help in this.

## MEDITATION

### Preliminary Instruction:

Meditation is a Christian use of the imagination so that what we might merely understand with our heads can become a part of our inner life and we can understand on the "heart level". Such use of the imagination was practiced in the early church when people "remembered" in the Lord's Supper what Jesus did (I Cor. 11:24) and repeated the stories of Jesus so that the power of these stories could become a part of their own experience. By relating the stories of Jesus to our lives through our imagination these stories can relate to our thoughts, feelings and needs and God can work with us in a very personal way. Today we are going to do this with the story of Jesus' baptism. We are going to create the scene in our mind's eye, we will watch it unfold, and then we will decide whether we would like to join Jesus in this experience, going through it like he did and then having a chance to sit down and talk with him about our experience. As you go through this you want to allow your mind to picture the scene or to create the dialogue with Jesus -- just allow it to happen; don't try to figure it out or to do it intentionally. Don't try to control the images. It is all right if they are not "correct" historically but borrowed from your present experience. Trust the experience.

This will be a good experience for you. Jesus will take care of you during it, and I will be here to guide the experience. If you ever feel that you strongly do not want to do something that is suggested, that is perfectly all right. Listen to your inner wisdom about what is right for you. When the meditation is over, I will call you out of your meditative state. If we are ready now, let us begin with prayer:

Loving heavenly Father, help us to know and feel what it meant for Jesus to leave Nazareth, to come to Judaea to be baptized by John. May his experience become ours through your

guidance and may you guide this experience within each of us in a way that is right for the needs you see in us. We trust ourselves to you.

Entrance Process:

Sit in a relaxed position, both feet upon the floor, arms upon your laps or the chair arms. You may lie on the floor if you wish. It is important to find a position in which you will feel comfortable for some time.

You will feel the tensions flowing out of your body and your body becoming comfortable. Sense your neck relaxing, your arms relaxing, your legs relaxing. If you have a serious concern that does not allow you to relax, represent it in some symbol and place it on the floor alongside of yourself. You can pick it up later. Now you can sense that the flow of thoughts in your mind is slowing so that gradually a place is clearing in your mind, free from any distractions, a place to allow the story of Jesus' baptism to come to life. You now feel comfortable. It is as if your body were resting on a cloud or a giant pillow.

Sense your breathing. Your breathing is slowing, indicating your relaxation. When you feel your breathing has reached a comfortable pace, slowly count down from 10 to 1, counting one number with each inhalation-exhalation. At each number you will relax into deeper meditative level. When you reach 1, remain there and I will give you further instructions. (Pause) If you have not completed your counting, please do so. You have now arrived at your meditative level.

Portrayal of Jesus Baptism:

In the clearing within your mind you can now begin to imagine what it looked like near the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized. Use whatever images your mind gives you, even if they are not like what you expected. Allow an image of the river to form in your mind. Listen to the flow of the water. Reach down and touch it to allow it to become real to you. Now look at the shore, the bank of the river. Is there grass, are there trees, rocks, animals? What of the people in the scene? If they have not yet appeared in your imagination, allow them to appear. How many are there? What do they look like, how are they clothed? Now look over the scene again. What do you see, hear, smell? What are people saying to each other? Visualize John the Baptist in the river. Can you find Jesus among the persons on the shore? What does he look like?

Jesus has come to John because John sensed that God was acting in history in a special way and Jesus wishes to open himself up to this. Jesus now stands at the shore. He removes his outer garment, knowing that as he takes it off to enter the water life will not be the same. With his garment he is putting off his old life with his family, his town of Nazareth, his previous work as a carpenter, and many of his old friends. When he returns to the shore he will take all this up again, but none of it will be the same. He steps into the water, his old life behind him, all the things that made him what he was. In trust he moves to the Baptist to discover what is there held in store for him. They exchange a glance and then the Baptist lowers him backwards into the water and raises him up again. A sense of the presence of God moves through his body as the Spirit comes upon him and a voice penetrates his consciousness: "Thou art my beloved Son". (Pause) Stripped of all that told him what he was Jesus now finds who he is. John releases his hold upon Jesus' body and Jesus moves slowly to the shore, there

picking up his garment and his previous life, to wear lightly over what he now knows himself to be. He sits upon a rock near the edge of the river to wait for you, to share with you his experience. (Pause)

### One's Own Baptism by John

Now you are standing near the shore. You look at John and he motions to you to enter the water. If you wish and feel comfortable in sharing in this experience, you remove your outer garment and shoes or sandals, thinking of what you might be temporarily placing there with your garment: much of your previous life-experience, many of the things which identified you to yourself. These you will later pick up and wear in a new way. You have a feeling that God is inviting you to participate in this event. As you step into the river you feel the water around your body, cool and inviting. John reaches out to take you by the hand and steady you. Now you look into John's face. Does he say anything to you? He grasps you firmly about the shoulders and gently lowers you into the water and out again. Your feelings are those of trust and expectation. And now -- do you have any feeling of God's presence and is God saying anything to you through this experience: who does God say you are? (Pause) John now directs you back to the shore. You may walk back as slowly as you wish. When you arrive at the shore you pick up and put on your garment and all that you have laid off. Does what you are wearing now feel differently? (Pause)

### Dialogue:

Now you may go to the rock where Jesus is sitting and sit beside him. See, he invites you. You may feel that you are not ready for this, and if so, then merely sit down on the shore and reflect on your experience. If you want to talk with Jesus, go to him and sit with him on the rock. How does he receive you? He will want to share with you his experience and you may want to discuss with him yours. Allow a conversation to begin naturally. Carry on this conversation until I ask you to bring it to a close and come out of your meditation. If you just want to remain with Jesus in silence, that is all right. At the end of your conversation Jesus will give you a phrase which will remind you of what happened here, and this phrase when you meditate on it, will enable you to return to this experience. (Long pause allowing sufficient time for the conversation.)<sup>516</sup>

### Exit Process:

Now it is time to leave your meditative level and return to full awareness of the room in which we are. Complete your conversation with Jesus or your reflection on this experience. You are now beginning to return to your normal level of functioning. You become more aware of what is in the room, but you carry with you what you have experienced and the feelings of peace and relaxation which have been a part of this experience. I will now give you a few minutes to return from your meditation at your own pace. Then later we will share whatever you feel free to share of this experience.

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<sup>516</sup> For this use of a phrase see Ira Progoff in *Process Meditation* where he discusses the use of "Mantra/Crystals", an expression which symbolizes an experience and which when used can reintroduce one into the same experience to relive it or to carry it further. Ira Progoff, *The Practice of Process Meditation: The Intensive Journal Way to Spiritual Experience*, NY: Dialogue House, 1980, pp. 258 ff.



It is important throughout the process to be able to be aware of the persons who are meditating, especially if this is a new experience for them. Thus you should watch what is going on rather than trying to participate in the meditation yourself. If anyone should seem to be having a difficult experience, you can then deal with this. If you have suggested the nature of the experience as good, an experience of a loving God, chances are rather remote that anyone will have a bad experience -- especially when you have given them permission not to proceed if they experience resistance. Where you occasionally could have difficulty is in getting someone out of meditation if it has been a very good experience. Usually there is no real difficulty in patiently calling them back. If someone strongly resists, you can stay with them until they come out or just suggest them into sleep and let them sleep, awakening them a little later.

#### Debriefing:

For persons with little experience in meditation, it is important for them to have some chance to talk about it afterwards, especially someone who has experienced something and may need help understanding it. In any case, even for the those experienced in meditation, it is always helpful to discuss what happens with others so that others can assist in discernment of what happened and insights can be shared. It would thus be good to be able to meditate as part of a group.

There are many helpful books on meditation. At various points we have touched upon the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* and the suggestions for "mental prayer" in Francis de Sales *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Several methods have been provided in the chapter on the "Spiritual Reading of Scripture." Part Five of Morton Kelsey's *The Other Side of Silence* contains materials for meditative exercises. The works of Anthony de Mello, the Indian Jesuit provide resources in such books as *Sadhana: A Way to God: Christian Exercises In Eastern Form* and *Wellsprings: A Book of Spiritual Exercises*. Ira Progoff's *The Practice of Process Meditation* insightfully describes meditation and extended meditations are provided in *The Well and the Cathedral* and *The White Robed Monk*. Roberto Assagiolo in *Psychosynthesis* discusses development of the imagination and has several essays on various applications of the imagination, one a translation of an excellent essay by Wolfgang Kretschmer, Jr., on "Meditative Techniques in Psychotherapy." Kenneth Pelletier in *Mind As Healer / Mind As Slayer* includes a chapter on Autogenic Training and Visualization. <sup>517</sup>

#### Contemplation

While meditation focuses on the use of images to become aware of God and self, contemplation seeks direct awareness of both, sometimes regarding images as interfering with this direct awareness. Contemplation has had a significant role in the mystical traditions of Christianity and is receiving renewed attention in the modern focus on spirituality.

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517. Morton Kelsey, *The Other Side of Silence: A Guide to Christian Meditation*, NY: Paulist Press, 1976.

Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana: A Way to God: Christian Exercises in Eastern Form*, St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978; *Wellsprings: A Book of Spiritual Exercises*, NY: Doubleday, 1984.

Ira Progoff, *The Practice of Process Meditation: The Intensive Journal Way to Spiritual Experience*, NY: Dialogue House, 1980; *The Well and The Cathedral*, NY: Dialogue House, d. ?; *The White Robed Monk*, with an essay on its use on Process Meditation, NY: Dialogue House, 1972.

Roberto Assagiolo, *Psychosynthesis: A Collection of Basic Writings*, NY: Penguin Books, 1976.

Kenneth R. Pelletier, *Mind as Healer / Mind as Slayer: A Holistic Approach to Preventing Stress Disorders*, NY: Delta, 1977.

I have found it helpful in understanding contemplation to consider what happens to the person in the process of development, socialization, and enculturation. Each person starts life with a basic (I prefer this to primitive) consciousness, aware of the immediate world but without being able to make clear distinctions or having any words or concepts by which to describe the sensations of experience. As the person develops self is distinguished from external others and objects, and the child begins to learn the names to give the various objects of its experience. Socialization and enculturation begin within the family, and are then continued within the school and community. Gradually a person is formed in whom the concepts and learnings about her/his world are an important part of the perception of the world. When a dog is seen it is not only the visual image which comes to mind, but the word "dog" also, along with all that one knows about dogs. Thus the information and concepts one has at one's disposal cause one to lose some clarity in the observation of this particular dog. A dog may be seen and one may completely ignore all observation of this dog, for one immediately knows what one sees. As one matures the understandings one has about most everything that one encounters color and predetermine perception.

As we gain in our ability to describe and name and eventually to think in abstraction from the objects themselves, we forget that everything that we name is in reality much more than the name we give to it. We gradually become distanced from the objects that we describe. This is particularly true in objects of great complexity, such as persons, or objects which transcend direct observation such as atomic structure or God.

When we are conscious of what happens in our development, then the *via negativa*, the way of unknowing, makes sense. In order to really pay attention to things as they are, after we have realized the power of our descriptive and naming abilities, we have to go the way of unnamings and unknowing to really see and hear what is there. Otherwise we always work with abstractions and cannot see those parts of reality which we have learned not to see. Thus John of the Cross says:

I entered - where - I did not know,  
Yet when I found that I was there,  
Though where I was I did not know,  
Profound and subtle things I learned;  
Nor can I say what I discerned,  
For I remained uncomprehending,  
All knowledge transcending. ....

And if you wish to hear,  
This highest knowledge is conceived  
In a sense, sublime and clear  
Of the essence of the Deity;  
It is an act of His great Clemency  
That keeps us there uncomprehending,  
All knowledge transcending. <sup>518</sup>

Contemplation is then returning to a simplicity of awareness and observation, learning to transcend or lay aside what we have learned that separates us from Godself. In the process we also become aware of ourselves in a new way for we become perceptive of our reality which underlies all that we know about

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<sup>518</sup>. *St. John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1973, p. 179.

ourselves and ourselves as a functioning being. We frequently also become aware of the unity that underlies differentiated reality.

To do this creates anxiety because we find security in the structures of understanding that have been created in our life process. We journey into a strange land where we at first do not know what to anticipate. But God is there in the silence and the unknown. This is our faith. See the "fundamental contemplative statement" by Gerald May in the chapter on "The Experience of Evil." Those who have practiced contemplation, even as novices, frequently find this an experience of great peace, a time where, contrary to all other times of life where doing and responsibility are characteristic, here one only has to be, and to be with God. The great symbol of contemplation for me is Rembrandt's the Return of the Prodigal, where the father clasps the son to his breast and they are suspended in time, together, in a loving embrace, their being together the essence of their existence.

Another aspect to contemplation is the movement from a more active role to a less active role. In contemplation one does not try to do anything or predetermine to experience something, but tries, by stilling of mind and body, to create an open place in human existence into which God may bring what God wishes: it is an open silence. In Contemplative experience gradually the experience of God's activity and resourcing of the experience becoming more significant than one's own activity.

For those interested in contemplation, valuable help will be found in Gerald May's *Pilgrimage Home* where he describes the learnings of the Shalem Institute in the conduct of contemplative groups, its primary methodology, and provides concrete suggestions as to how groups using this methodology might be started and conducted.<sup>519</sup>

### **Exercise In Contemplation 520**

In contemplation one seeks to go beyond images to what is beyond the images. It is not that one needs to completely get rid of images, but to be directly aware of what is beyond them. Two significant areas of contemplative experience involve: a direct experience of oneself, a direct experience of the Transcendent or God. This exercise is an introductory exercise and seeks to give one experience in this area by a direct experience of the components of oneself. This experience should provide a basis for quieting the mind and later directing one's attention towards God.

One's experience of oneself is frequently very amorphous and vague because we often identify ourselves with our activities and almost feel that we no longer exist when we cease being physically active. I would like to ask you to become aware of four components of your inner self so that you may eventually direct your attention towards God. Allow this awareness to come; do not try to force it. Merely be attentive and observant. What we will try to observe are:

1. the inner field or stage of consciousness as a larger area than that occupied by thoughts or images;
2. the occurrence of and space occupied by thoughts and images and to observe their

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<sup>519</sup>. Gerald G. May, *Pilgrimage Home: The Conduct of Contemplative Practice in Groups*, NY: Paulist Press, 1979.

<sup>520</sup>. This exercise is described with less detail than the one on meditation. You may wish to reread the one on the meditation on Jesus' Baptism before doing this one. This is written for someone leading others. An individual doing this alone may read this exercise and then take oneself through it or put in on a tape and then allow the tape to guide you through it. Students frequently say that it is easier to be led in their experience than to take oneself through it. It is, however, important to develop the ability to do both meditation and contemplation on one's own.

appearance and disappearance;

(When one becomes aware of the vastness of the inner field and the limited space occupied by thoughts it is easier to place thoughts in perspective and clear the inner space for the experience of God.)

3. the part of the self that observes all this;

(Awareness of the "inner observer" helps one sense oneself as observer over against inner space and thoughts which are what is observed. This is the part of the self that directs attention towards God.)

4. where thoughts and images come from.

(To observe this gives one a sense of the source and flow of our own being.)

This experience should be discussed in small groups afterwards in order to help clarify what was experienced and to share significant insights.

Entrance Process - a quieting and relaxation process, such as in the meditative exercise

#### Contemplative Exercise

(Provide time in your suggestion of these elements for them to transpire.)

1. Be aware of field of consciousness, like a large stage covering whole inner vision.

-Watch thoughts, images, colors, etc., as they move over and through this stage

-Become aware of yourself observing this

-Sense the distinctiveness of and separation between  
thoughts and images  
field of consciousness  
the self observing

2. Place a rose or flower on your field of consciousness, your inner stage.

View your field of consciousness as a large picture frame covering all the inner field with the flower in it.

Shrink the picture frame to about 1/4 of its size. Notice space around it. Shrink it further and place it to the right of your inner field.

3. Now you are aware of yourself observing, your field of consciousness, and the very small space in your field of consciousness that a thought or image occupies. Allow the frame with the picture to disappear. See if you can continue to be aware of yourself observing, your field of consciousness, and thoughts, images as they appear and disappear within your consciousness.

4. Now see if you can observe where the thoughts and images come from and sense the flow of energy behind this deep within yourself.

5. Remaining in silence for a while, see if you can allow your thoughts to slow down and stop so that what is before your inner observer is only a sense of the source of yourself and the vast inner field of conscious, your stage, your inner "cloud of unknowing," through which you may later relate to God.

Exit Process - Bring the participants in the exercise gradually out of the experience.

(You may find participants frequently saying afterwards that they did not wish to come out of this experience because of the deep sense of peace that was part of it. If there is difficulty bringing anyone out of the experience, softly call or suggest them out of it or suggest them into sleep out of which you can awaken them.)

Later contemplative exercises should allow persons to use what has been learned and direct their attention and energy into the inner field of consciousness towards God. Remember that many of the mystics characterize this attention and energy as desire and love.

It is also possible to do an exercise where in contemplation persons are asked to direct their attention towards different parts of the room where other persons are located. Often they will become aware that attention directed to different parts of the room produces different sensations, so that they are aware of individuals without visual or auditory aids. They may remember where the persons are located, but the exercise is not to sense who is where, but to sense their non-visual and non-auditory awareness of the persons and the differences as they move from one person to another and when they direct attention to a place in the room where no person is located. The value of this is to indicate the possibility of inner or intuitive perception, which then may be applied to awareness of God.

### **Theory of the Meditative/Contemplative Process**

In meditation and contemplation the concern is to change one's usual level of consciousness or field of awareness to a different level than the one in which one usually functions when awake and active. Analysis of the brain waves of this new level indicate slow *Alpha* or *Theta* waves, in contrast to the usual rapid *Beta* waves of the alert mental state. This new level is close to the level of sleep, but not the same, and there can and should be a mental alertness and attention, though it is not the same as alertness when one is strenuously engaged in some activity. One might term it a "quiet alertness." The experiences that one has on this level are varied and this accounts for the many descriptions of this experience among practitioners. One may experience:

1. elements of one's consciousness and elements of the unconscious which rise to the surface of consciousness in the form of images and auditions;
2. if one moves beyond the images of 1, one may actually experience the stream of one's own being and consciousness;
3. one may have a new experience of something observed through the senses, on which one is concentrating in meditation, e.g., an experience of becoming one with a flower;
4. an experience of what is beyond oneself and beyond the perception of ordinary senses:
  - a. a telepathic experience or knowledge of something occurring at a distance;
  - b. an experience of the Transcendent realm, which may be described in pantheistic terms -- the divine present everywhere, in all things -- or as God's Kingdom;
  - c. an experience of God or Christ or even other persons who are in the Transcendent realm.

All of these experiences listed in 4. may come through the media of images and auditions or they may come in a more direct form, without the aid of images.

From the above it can be seen how the concerns of various religious and meditational movements presume an experience of certain of the above and therefore usually their experience is limited to what they presuppose. Zen, for example, presupposes a unitive experience of the Transcendent realm, of Buddha-nature, and so does not include the experience of a personal God which is beyond this general realm which might be called "the ground of being".

Since our consciousness or field of awareness is usually focused on our world as perceived through our senses and our bodily sensations, to be aware of the new areas listed above one has to be able to step aside from or undo these usual foci of attention and the presupposed limitations of experience. Thus any discussion of mystical experience in the various religious traditions usually involves the following:

1. Stilling -- Involved here is a quieting of bodily and mental activity; (sometimes discussed as "SILENCE")
2. Detachment -- Being able to step back from our concern for the world, things, and even basic needs which distract;
3. Negation or Unthinking -- Being able to lay aside our learned and experienced understanding of things so that we may relate to the reality beyond words to which the words point;
4. Relocating the Ego -- The Ego as the center of our consciousness and identity, the self-awareness by which we seek to control life and experience, needs to be moved out of the center of our consciousness so that what is beyond our control, what is given to us from the unconscious and from the Transcendent is allowed to come to our consciousness.

*Stilling* is helped by relaxation techniques. Bodily awareness and tensions can distract. Some type of gentle exercise (not strenuous) may help to release physical tension. A frequently used technique is while relaxing to tense parts of the body and then relax them, becoming aware of relaxation in contrast to the tension. Sometimes techniques focus on regular and monotonous physical processes to relax, like becoming aware of the regularity of breathing. To focus on breathing is helpful because the slowing of breathing is a clue to relaxation. One technique is to make a list of concerns and distractions on a mental sheet of paper and then place this alongside you in your imagination. This frees you from the concerns, also making you aware that these concerns are not lost but can be retrieved whenever necessary.

The assumption of a comfortable position is important. It should be a position which is comfortable, but does not put one to sleep. Relaxation is for the purpose of eliminating distractions to focused attention and alertness. The full Lotus position in Yoga or Zazen (the sitting posture) in Zen is often uncomfortable to Westerners who are not accustomed to them. The half Lotus position, with the left foot on the right thigh, is usually possible and fairly comfortable. Sitting in a chair is more natural to Westerners. The back should be kept erect. Though there are meditative traditions which use a lying posture, it is easy to fall asleep. When sitting, one hand may be placed in the palm of the other with the thumbs touching. This provides a symbolic body position which gives one a feeling of being closed to the outside world.

Regarding quieting the mind, it is very hard to quiet the mind "intentionally". One procedure is to not try to control the thoughts and images which bubble up from the unconscious. Observe them coming and going, but make no effort to deal with them, thus allowing them to run their course rather than to perpetuate them by giving them attention. Other procedures border on "tricking" the mind. Some techniques give the mind something to focus on:

- an imaginary spot on the forehead, above the eyes, a spot within the mind
- a candle or light
- a sound such as a metronome, or a Mantra (a repeated word or phrase which may or may not be said aloud).

Some forms of Buddhism use Koans, which are riddle-like sayings which trap the mind by involving it in something which is essentially insoluble. Some sayings of Jesus could function as Koans and for Mantras one could use "*Abba*" (Father) or the Jesus Prayer of Orthodox tradition: "Jesus Christ Son of God, have

mercy on me, a sinner." I prefer the Greek or Russian form of "Lord, have mercy" because of its rhythmic nature: *Kyrie, Eleison* (pronounced Keyrea alayeson, e and a pronounced long) and *Hospodi Pomilui* (pronounced Hospode Pomilue, first o short and others long, i and u short and e long). Counting procedures also serve to keep the mind focused.

*Detachment* is really the cultivation of an attitude towards life and the world. It does not have to be ascetic and abusive of body or physical existence. It should involve a prioritizing of what is most important in life and the transfer of primary attachment to these (e.g., Matt. 6:33 "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness").

*Negation* involves clarification that God is not the words which we use about God and a willingness to move beyond the limitations of words. Paul is supportive of this in his recognition of the limitations of theology (e.g., I Cor. 13) and his assertion of the primacy of the Spirit (e.g., "experience") over concepts.

*Relocating the Ego* means for a while relinquishing control over ourselves. This may be frightening for those who seek to keep their lives in order by rigidly controlling it and may be a strange experience to those who have not tried it. It is then quite helpful and proper to think of just moving the Ego off center, but keeping it on the periphery of our consciousness so it may step back in and exercise control whenever it seems appropriate. The Ego then functions as an observer of what is going on and may control where necessary. It is also helpful to invite God or Christ into our consciousness as another observer and element of control.

It should be apparent from the above that there needs to be an undoing of much of our learnings and some of our experience. It is therefore not easy and it is no wonder that in some mystical traditions vast amounts of time, even a person's lifetime, are devoted to this and some of these experiences may take years. It would seem wise then to be patient and do what one can within the limits of time available, appreciatively experiencing what is given to one within one's limits. It is good that there are a few who can give much time to this so that they can bear witness to experiences and realities which may be beyond our capabilities. In all areas of life there are the specialists. Then too there are those moments of life when through crisis, moving emotional experience, beauty, etc., our limited perceptions of reality are cracked open and God breaks through -- without any particular methodology. For these times we can only be thankful.

Meditative/Contemplative experience helps us to "CENTER" our existence in transcendent realities, and thus to handle life with a greater composure and gentleness, resulting in a greater peacefulness. It may also help us to restructure the dynamics of our unconscious by relating in a more direct fashion to our unconscious. Ultimately, out of it may develop a whole lifestyle which incorporates its elements into our daily activity, such as in Tilden Edwards, *Living Simply Through the Day*.<sup>521</sup>

### **Studies of Contemplation/Meditation**

Whereas contemplation and meditation have a long tradition in Christianity and non-Christian religions, it is only recently that their phenomena have been able to be scientifically examined. Barbara Brown in *New Mind, New Body*, provides a discussion of meditation, brain waves, and bio-feedback.<sup>522</sup> There are many

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<sup>521</sup>. Tilden Edwards, *Living Simply Through the Day: Spiritual Survival in a Complex Age*, NY: Paulist Press, 1977.

<sup>522</sup>. Barbara B. Brown, *New Mind, New Body: Bio-Feedback: New Directions for the Mind*, NY: Harper and Row, 1974.

who are now using meditative or visualization techniques as an aid in healing and have engaged in scientific study of their effects.<sup>523</sup> Psychosynthesis and Jungian psychology also uses them in therapy.

Thomas Merton has provided us with *New Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>524</sup> Williard Johnson has provided an excellent history of "meditation" called *Riding the Ox Home*.<sup>525</sup> William Johnston, a Jesuit who has long lived in Japan with extensive contact with Buddhism, has produced such books as *Silent Music, and Christian Zen*.<sup>526</sup> If one wishes to examine Zen, I would recommend Philip Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen*.<sup>527</sup> *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* also provides important insights, especially the included lectures on Zen by D.T. Suzuki who had much to do with introducing Zen into the West and its psychological application.<sup>528</sup> Bede Griffiths, a Roman Catholic monk who has created a prayer center in India, provides an appreciative understanding of Hinduism in *The Cosmic Revelation*.<sup>529</sup>

Marilyn Mallory, *Christian Mysticism: Transcending Techniques*.

An intriguing study, originally a doctoral dissertation, is that of Marilyn May Mallory, *Christian Mysticism: Transcending Techniques*, subtitled *A Theological Reflection on the Empirical Testing of the Teaching of St. John of the Cross*.<sup>530</sup> It deserves extended treatment here. The book laments that Westerners know more of the Oriental than the Christian contemplative traditions and proceeds to study "one of the most systematized of these traditions, the so-called 'Spanish Mysticism'".<sup>531</sup> The focus is on St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), whose teachings are empirically tested among members of the Discalced Carmelite Order founded by St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. Mallory also seeks to develop an interpretation of St. John which will not be limited to "cloister spirituality", but which will provide a spirituality designed for lay persons. This is done by tracing St. John's ascetical teaching, his dualism, to Augustine's influence<sup>532</sup> and by asserting that the dualistic framework, in which John of the Cross places his view of the mystic, is not intrinsic to the mystical experience<sup>533</sup> St. John's approach is not necessarily limited to those who can apply a "super-technique" extending to the follower's whole way of life, but can be used within the life-limitations of the lay person.<sup>534</sup> The importance of St. John, Mallory asserts, is that "his teachings constitute perhaps one of the few, if not the only, standardized,

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523. O Carl Simonton, Stephanie Matthews-Simonton, and James Creghton, *Getting Well Again*, NY: Bantam, 1980.

Bernie S. Siegel, MD, *Love, Medicine and Miracles: Lessons Learned About Self-Healing from a Surgeon's Experience with Exceptional Patients*, NY: Harper and Row, 1986.

Kenneth R. Pelletier, *Mind as Healer, Mind as Slayer*, NY: Delacorte Press, 1977; *Toward A Science of Consciousness*, NY: Delta, 1978.

Herbert Benson, *The Relaxation Response*, NY: William Morrow, 1975; *The Mind-Body Effect*, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1979; *Beyond the Relaxation Response: How to Harness the Healing Power of Your Personal Beliefs*, NY: Times Books, 1984.

524. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, NY: A New Directions Book, 1961.

525. Willard Johnson, *Riding the Ox Home: A History of Meditation from Shamanism to Science*, London: Rider, 1982.

526. William Johnston, *Christian Zen*, NY: Harper Colophon Books, 1971; *Silent Music: The Science of Meditation*, NY: Harper and Row, 1974.

527. Roshi Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Revised and Expanded, Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1980.

528. D.T. Suzuki, Erich Fromm, and Richard De Martino, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, NY: Harper Colophon Books, 1960.

529. Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation: The Hindu Way to God*, Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1983.

530. Marilyn May Mallory, *Christian Mysticism: Transcending Techniques: A Theological Reflection on the Empirical Testing of the Teaching of St. John of the Cross*, Amsterdam: Van Gorcum Assen, 1977.

531. *Ibid.*, p. vii

532. *Ibid.*, pp. 33ff.

533. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

534. *Ibid.*, p. 21.



systematized approaches to mystical development which is native to the western world and which is put into practice by many followers even today . . ."535

Mallory feels that the pattern of mystical development affirmed by St. John is generally supported by empirical evidence: "prayer development is an accelerating movement which zig-zags increasingly. The dynamism involved is an erotic or libidinal energy which alternates between two poles, happy and unhappy emotional experiences (unhappy means experience of the absence of God or inability to pray, etc.). In between these two poles is a neutral area which includes both passive and active prayer forms which are emotionally subdued. The beginner starts with active, emotionally neutral prayer and goes on to passive, emotionally neutral or restful contemplation, which increases as emotionality increases. Gradually the pendulum swings between the two emotional poles. The libidinal energy becomes increasingly intense. Finally the breaking point is reached and the unhappy 'pole' decreases in importance, while the happy 'pole' gains. The final state is a fixation at the happy pole, within a context of great rest."<sup>536</sup> Psychological, cultural and religious variables can influence the libidinal build-up of energy, some factors accelerating it and others slowing it. Those influencing it positively are:

- Psychological variables -- stability, happy emotionality, extraversion, normal ego strength
- Religious variables -- openness to God's love and receptivity to "gifts" from one's tradition and group
- Cultural variables -- positive attitude to a group or a tradition, ability to establish ties

All of these essentially describe the stable and open person.

Mallory sums up her description of the process:

. . . one can say that concentration in prayer depends on the degree of libidinal involvement rather than on the degree of intellectual alertness. The tension involved in this highly-charged libidinal prayer form requires a strong psychological structure in the subject, capable of supporting the intensity of the emotionality and the tension generated from the rapid alternation between happy and unhappy states. When the psychological, or perhaps the psycho-physiological structure is weak, this network of prayer experiences will collapse again and again. In such a case, no development is possible. Furthermore the momentum cannot build up if the dependency upon the final point of orientation is not well-established. The dynamic movement in prayer is the result of the ever-shortening distance between the contemplative and the goal, Christ. The forward or upward movement in prayer is caused by the attraction or pull of the object of union, Christ.<sup>537</sup>

Mallory sees the ability of a person to contemplate in relationship to the degree of libidinal involvement which diminishes distractions to concentration in contemplation. She explains this by the English psychiatrist Hans Eysenck's theories about the "strong nervous system".<sup>538</sup> Eysenck built upon Jung's personality theories, but differed on the explanation of the extrovert and the introvert. For Jung this depended on what the libido was positively attracted to, the inner or outer world. For Eysenck this depended on the functioning of the "cortico-reticular loop". The reticular formation sends arousal and

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535. Ibid., p. 3.

536. Ibid., pp. 62-3.

537. Ibid. pp. 64-5.

538. Hans J. Eysenck, *The Biological Basis of Personality*, C.C. Thomas, 1967; *Readings in Extraversion/Introversion*, London: Staple Press, 1970.

inhibition messages to the cortex of the brain. Inhibition messages guard against over-reaction to stimuli. When arousal messages predominate, the system is over-sensitized with resultant nervousness, confusion and withdrawal -- therefore introversion. The extrovert can relate to the external environment because his nervous system can manage the stimuli from it. Eysenck also postulates a "visceral brain" which is the seat of the emotions and over-reacts to stimuli if the "cortico-reticular loop" is not stable.

Mallory rejects Eysenck's theory of emotionality, but accepts the theory that extroversion is caused by proper inhibition of the nervous system. It is her argument, supported by her empirical data, that the stable nervous system allows the orientation of the libido to the outer world and so therefore the libidinal orientation to the outer world is characteristic of the extrovert. It is then the extrovert, not the introvert, in whom the libidinal involvements can take place which are necessary to concentration and mystical experience.

Whereas Eysenck seems to consider the traits of extroversion/introversion and anxiety to be hereditary, these results suggest that both traits can be enhanced or decreased through meditation. Oriental meditation seems to help the subject cultivate extroversion, or inhibition of both external stimuli and internal stimuli. With inhibition of internal stimuli such as the fantasy and the intellect, the limbic circuit (emotional-libidinal) seems to gain a more predominant role than is usually the case. Jung suggested that oriental meditation might establish a balance between thought and emotion, and between extroversion and introversion. The data, however, suggest that oriental meditation accentuates extroversion and happy emotionality. Hereby it strengthens the nervous system.<sup>539</sup>

Mallory's identification of Contemplative propensities with extroversion is borne out by EEGs taken of the Carmelites. Brain waves are classified as:

Delta -- 1-3 per sec.  
Theta -- 4-7 per sec.  
Alpha -- 8-11 per sec.  
Beta -- over 12 per sec.

Alpha waves are identified with the ability to be Contemplative. Mallory believes that in the case of Christian contemplation the existence of Alpha waves is more related to the extroversion personality which tends to have more Alpha anyway, while the non-extrovert has difficulty producing Alpha in contemplation. Contrary to Zen and Yoga, Christianity has not done much to help the person who is not naturally gifted in this direction.<sup>540</sup> "What is missing in Christian spirituality, therefore, is a technique which strengthens the nervous system by lowering anxiety and increasing inhibition. For this reason, unstable subjects especially will have trouble inhibiting the imaginings and inner distractions which arise when the usual repressive mechanisms are relaxed . . . They stay therefore at the level of active meditation and inner distraction, corresponding to excitation, not inhibition, in the cortico-reticular loop."<sup>541</sup> It is only this inhibition which frees the libido for its attachments.

The technique which Mallory advises is the "Via Negativa", not to be associated with strict asceticism. St. John in Ascent, I,1,14 says:

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<sup>539</sup>. Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>540</sup>. Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>541</sup>. Ibid., p. 107.

To come to that which you do not know,  
you have to go a way you do not know;  
To come to that which you can not feel,  
you have to go a way you can not feel;  
To come to that which you do not possess,  
you have to go a way you do not possess;  
to come to that which you are not,  
you have to go via that which you are not.<sup>542</sup>

As she describes it:

The 'via negativa', or the anti-technique, of Christian mysticism is the rejection of man's reliance on his own mental or emotional abilities to reach mystical union. Instead of self-reliance, the 'via negativa' teaches one to rely on the divine darkness, the divine force of life, the divine intelligence, in the practice of dark faith. This is an extroverted attitude, an openness toward receiving something from outside oneself from a God who is ready to communicate himself to all of creation because, as pseudo-Dionysius states, good wants to communicate itself, i.e., all that is good wants to share itself. The 'via negativa' is a highly optimistic view of the goodness of God and of man's ability to open up to the communicative God. The basis of the whole system of Christian mysticism is therefore the idea of God's reciprocity and man's receptivity. The content of the art of Christian mysticism is not passivity but rather receptivity, or even better, reciprocity. In the act of contemplation, man is busy reciprocating to God's initiative in love. ....

The original purpose of John of the Cross, as stated in *Night* I,8,3, is to instruct those who have used a meditative technique to advantage for some time, but who have arrived at a kind of spiritual plateau. His anti-technique is designed to help such people advance further by teaching them to let go of all techniques. This does not necessarily mean that he rejects techniques; rather he teaches a certain nonchalance in their regard. It is entirely possible that an advanced contemplative could combine the practice of the 'via negativa' with some technique that aids recollection or concentration. The point which John of the Cross seems to want to make is that the final goal is beyond any technique, and to attain such a goal one has to go a way that leaves all technique behind in the end. <sup>543</sup>

Concentration then is facilitated by freeing the libido for the love of God, and "the sensual perception of God's intruding presence is the basis of concentration in prayer."<sup>544</sup> In other words, Mallory affirms that our sensual resonance with God's love for us is natural, proper, and a significant motive for concentration and contemplation. She quotes St. John:

And in this way the soul enjoys here all the things of God. He communicates to it strength, wisdom and love, beauty, grace and kindness, etc. Since God is all these things, the soul tastes them together in one single touch of God, according to its faculties and its substance.

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<sup>542</sup>. Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>543</sup>. Ibid., pp. 149-150.

<sup>544</sup>. Ibid., p. 158.

And from this good of the soul at times the unction of the Holy Spirit rebounds in the body and it enjoys according to its sensual part; all its members and bones and marrows -- not as weakly as usual but with a feeling of great delight and glory, which you feel even in the tiniest arteries of the feet and the hands; and the body feels so much glory in that of the soul that after its manner it glorifies God, feeling him in its bones . . . And therefore since all one might say of this would be less than it is, it suffices to say, regarding both the bodily as well as the spiritual delight that it tastes of eternal life." (Flame II,22) <sup>545</sup>

Sensual perception, however, varies. St. John assumes that the person will probably begin on the level of meditation which will help in the training of the person in concentrating his attention on the object of his meditation. But then the person plateaus and a spiritual dryness sets in, the dark night of the senses. This is a result of the spiritual stage at which one has arrived. Now God would lead to the prayer of the Spirit, from active to passive prayer, and the believer is "penetrating deeper levels of his ability to love".<sup>546</sup>

Following this little by little a new inner concentration is experienced and a growing alternation of periods of pleasure and lack of pleasure. Yet the believer still remains somewhat of an observer of the pleasurable experiences, wanting to enjoy this pleasure without being possessed by God. The culmination of the process is when one allows oneself to be absorbed by the experiences and no longer remains a bystander/observer.<sup>547</sup>

What hinders the Contemplative is the division in the desires of the human beings. St. John says that the heart is driven toward possessing something.

Its desire is like a cavern which has a profound capacity for experiencing the vehement thirst for God. But the heart is usually unaware or ignorant of this hunger for God because it has its attention fixed on desires for creatures (Flame I,18). When these caverns are filled with affections for creatures the heart does not notice its great emptiness and thirst for God (Flame I,18). Although these caverns are capable of containing a desire for God himself, the smallest and most insignificant thing can capture the heart's attention and make man unaware of this hunger for God (Flame III,18-22). However, when the heart does become aware of this thirst for God within it, it can become completely absorbed, undone or melted in its desire for possession of God (Flame a I,7). Since this desire to possess is inherent in man's heart, the crucial point is not to eliminate the drive to possess, but to enlighten the heart about the real object of its desire.<sup>548</sup>

Erroneous desires focus on both material and spiritual goods. Nothing can take the place of Godself.<sup>549</sup>

The "dark night" is part of the person's normal development. St. John

gives this period of depression meaning by placing it within the framework of effective redemption. The dark night is the night of faith, in which the soul learns to rely on God's force of love and not on its own forces. The invading force of God's eros makes the heart realize its own misery and sin all the more clearly (Night II,5,5). The soul becomes undone in inner torment, both natural and spiritual (Night II,6,5). However, precisely by becoming aware of its

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545. Ibid., p. 160.

546. Ibid., p. 179.

547. Ibid., pp. 180-181.

548. Ibid., pp. 183-184.

549. Ibid., pp. 184ff.

immersion in its own miseries (Night II,7,3), the soul is freed from every kind of 'evil spirit' (Night II,9,3). This introduces the motif of the 'cure' which the dark night brings -- precisely by being made aware of its illness, the soul can be cured. The darkness of faith will eventually give way to the light of faith, and effective healing. In this period of passive purgation, the 'old man' dies off and the 'new man', the likeness to Christ, is born (Night I,4,2).<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>550</sup>. Ibid., p. 202.