

2. The Discipline of Meditation

True contemplation is not a psychological trick but a theological grace.

—THOMAS MERTON

In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in "muchness" and "manyness," he will rest satisfied. Psychiatrist Carl Jung once remarked, "Hurry is not of the Devil; it is the Devil."¹

If we hope to move beyond the superficialities of our culture, including our religious culture, we must be willing to go down into the recreating silences, into the inner world of contemplation. In their writings all the masters of meditation beckon us to be pioneers in this frontier of the Spirit. Though it may sound strange to modern ears, we should without shame enroll as apprentices in the school of contemplative prayer.

Biblical Witness

The discipline of meditation was certainly familiar to the authors of Scripture. The Bible uses two different Hebrew words (תָּבַח and תָּשַׁח) to convey the idea of meditation, and together they are used some fifty-eight times. These words have various meanings: listening to God's word, reflecting on God's works, rehearsing God's deeds, ruminating on God's law, and more. In each case there is stress upon changed behavior as a result of our encounter with the living God. Repentance and obedience are essential features in any biblical understanding of meditation. The psalmist exclaims, "Oh, how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day. . . . I hold my feet from every

evil way, in order to keep thy word. I do not turn aside from thy ordinances, for thou hast taught me" (Ps. 119:97, 101, 102). It is this continual focus upon obedience and faithfulness that most clearly distinguishes Christian meditation from its Eastern and secular counterparts.

Those who walked through the pages of the Bible knew the ways of meditation. "And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening" (Gen. 24:63). "I think of thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the watches of the night" (Ps. 63:6). The Psalms virtually sing of the meditations of the people of God upon the law of God: "My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may meditate upon thy promise" (Ps. 119:148). The psalm that introduces the entire Psalter calls all people to emulate the "blessed man" whose "delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps. 1:2).

The old priest Eli knew how to listen to God and helped the young boy Samuel know the word of the Lord (1 Sam. 3:1-18). Elijah spent many a day and night in the wilderness learning to discern the "still small voice of Yahweh" (1 Kings 19:9-18). Isaiah saw the Lord "high and lifted up" and heard his voice saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isa. 6:1-8). Jeremiah discovered the word of God to be "a burning fire shut up in my bones" (Jer. 20:9). And on march the witnesses. These were people who were close to the heart of God. God spoke to them not because they had special abilities, but because they were willing to listen.

In the midst of an exceedingly busy ministry Jesus made a habit of withdrawing to "a lonely place apart" (Matt. 14:13).^{*} He did this not just to be away from people, but so he could be with God. What did Jesus do time after time in those deserted hills? He sought out his heavenly Father; he listened to

^{*}See also Matt. 4:1-11, Luke 6:12, Matt. 14:23, Mark 1:35, Mark 6:31, Luke 5:16, Matt. 17:1-9, and Matt. 26:36-46.

him, he communed with him. And he beckons us to do the same.

Hearing and Obeying

Christian meditation, very simply, is the ability to hear God's voice and obey his word. It is that simple. I wish I could make it more complicated for those who like things difficult. It involves no hidden mysteries, no secret mantras, no mental gymnastics, no esoteric flights into the cosmic consciousness. The truth of the matter is that the great God of the universe, the Creator of all things desires our fellowship. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve talked with God *and* God talked with them—they were in communion. Then came the Fall, and in an important sense there was a rupture of the sense of perpetual communion, for Adam and Eve hid from God. But God continued to reach out to his rebellious children, and in stories of such persons as Cain, Abel, Noah, and Abraham we see God speaking and acting, teaching and guiding.

Moses learned, albeit with many vacillations and detours, how to hear God's voice and obey his word. In fact, Scripture witnesses that God spoke to Moses "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exod. 33:11). There was a sense of intimate relationship, of communion. As a people, however, the Israelites were not prepared for such intimacy. Once they learned a little about God, they realized that being in his presence was risky business and told Moses so: "You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." (Exod. 20:19). In this way they could maintain religious respectability without the attendant risks. This was the beginning of the great line of the prophets and the judges, Moses being the first. But it was a step away from the sense of immediacy, the sense of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

In the fullness of time Jesus came and taught the reality of the kingdom of God and demonstrated what life could be like

in that kingdom. He established a living fellowship that would know him as Redeemer and King, listening to him in all things and obeying him at all times. In his intimate relationship with the Father, Jesus modeled for us the reality of that life of hearing and obeying. "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise" (John 5:19). "I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge" (John 5:30). "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14:10). When Jesus told his disciples to abide in him, they could understand what he meant for he was abiding in the Father. He declared that he was the good Shepherd and that his sheep know his voice (John 10:4). He told us that the Comforter would come, the Spirit of truth, who would guide us into all truth (John 16:13).

In his second volume Luke clearly implies that following his resurrection and the ascension Jesus continues "to do and teach" even if people cannot see him with the naked eye (Acts 1:1). Both Peter and Stephen point to Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:15 of the prophet like Moses who is to speak and whom the people are to hear and obey (Acts 3:22, 7:37).^{*} In the book of Acts we see the resurrected and reigning Christ, through the Holy Spirit, teaching and guiding his children: leading Philip to new unreached cultures (Acts 8), revealing his messiahship to Paul (Acts 9), teaching Peter about his Jewish nationalism (Acts 10), guiding the Church out of its cultural captivity (Acts 15). What we see over and over again is God's people learning to live on the basis of hearing God's voice and obeying his word.

This, in brief, forms the biblical foundation for meditation, and the wonderful news is that Jesus has not stopped acting and speaking. He is resurrected and at work in our world. He

^{*}See also Deut. 18:15-18; Matt. 17:5; John 1:21, 4:19-25, 6:14, 7:37-40; Heb. 1:1-13, 3:7-8, 12:25.

is not idle, nor has he developed laryngitis. He is alive and among us as our Priest to forgive us, our Prophet to teach us, our King to rule us, our Shepherd to guide us.

All the saints throughout the ages have witnessed to this reality. How sad that contemporary Christians are so ignorant of the vast sea of literature on Christian meditation by faithful believers throughout the centuries! And their testimony to the joyful life of perpetual communion is amazingly uniform. From Catholic to Protestant, from Eastern Orthodox to Western Free Church we are urged to "live in his presence in uninterrupted fellowship."² The Russian mystic Theophan the Recluse says, "To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing, within you."³ The Anglican divine Jeremy Taylor declares, "Meditation is the duty of all."⁴ And in our day Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when asked why he meditated, replied, "Because I am a Christian."⁵ The witness of Scripture and the witness of the devotional masters are so rich, so alive with the presence of God that we would be foolish to neglect such a gracious invitation to experience, in the words of Madame Guyon, "the depths of Jesus Christ."⁶

The Purpose of Meditation

In meditation we are growing into what Thomas à Kempis calls "a familiar friendship with Jesus."⁷ We are sinking down into the light and life of Christ and becoming comfortable in that posture. The perpetual presence of the Lord (omnipresence, as we say) moves from a theological dogma into a radiant reality. "He walks with me and he talks with me" ceases to be pious jargon and instead becomes a straightforward description of daily life.

Please understand me: I am not speaking of some mushy, giddy, buddy-buddy relationship. All such sentimentality only betrays how little we know, how distant we are from the Lord high and lifted up who is revealed to us in Scripture. John tells

us in his Apocalypse that when he saw the reigning Christ, he fell at his feet as though dead, and so should we (Rev. 1:17). No, I am speaking of a reality more akin to what the disciples felt in the upper room when they experienced both intense intimacy and awful reverence.

What happens in meditation is that we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart. The wonderful verse "I stand at the door and knock . . ." was originally penned for believers, not unbelievers (Rev. 3:20). We who have turned our lives over to Christ need to know how very much he longs to eat with us, to commune with us. He desires a perpetual Eucharistic feast in the inner sanctuary of the heart. Meditation opens the door and, although we are engaging in specific meditation exercises at specific times, the aim is to bring this living reality into all of life. It is a portable sanctuary that is brought into all we are and do.

Inward fellowship of this kind transforms the inner personality. We cannot burn the eternal flame of the inner sanctuary and remain the same, for the Divine Fire will consume everything that is impure. Our ever-present Teacher will always be leading us into "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). Everything that is foreign to his way we will have to let go. No, not "have to" but "want to," for our desires and aspirations will be more and more conformed to his way. Increasingly, everything within us will swing like a needle to the polestar of the Spirit.

Understandable Misconceptions

Whenever the Christian idea of meditation is taken seriously, there are those who assume it is synonymous with the concept of meditation centered in Eastern religions. In reality, the two ideas stand worlds apart. Eastern meditation is an attempt to empty the mind; Christian meditation is an attempt to fill the mind. The two ideas are quite different.

Eastern forms of meditation stress the need to become detached from the world. There is an emphasis upon losing personhood and individuality and merging with the Cosmic Mind. There is a longing to be freed from the burdens and pains of this life and to be released into the impersonality of Nirvana. Personal identity is lost and, in fact, personality is seen as the ultimate illusion. There is an escaping from the miserable wheel of existence. There is no God to be attached to or to hear from. Detachment is the final goal of Eastern religion.

Christian meditation goes far beyond the notion of detachment. There is need for detachment—a "sabbath of contemplation" as Peter of Celles, a Benedictine monk of the twelfth century, put it.⁸ But there is a danger in thinking only in terms of detachment as Jesus indicates in his story of the man who had been emptied of evil but not filled with good. "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man . . . he goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first" (Luke 11:24-26).⁹

No, detachment is not enough; we must go on to *attachment*. The detachment from the confusion all around us is in order to have a richer attachment to God. Christian meditation leads us to the inner wholeness necessary to give ourselves to God freely.

Another misconception about meditation is that it is too difficult, too complicated. Perhaps it is best left to the professional who has more time to explore the inner regions. Not at all. The acknowledged experts in this way never report that they were on a journey only for the privileged few, the spiritual giants. They would laugh at the very idea. They felt that what they were doing was a natural human activity—as natural, and as important, as breathing. They would tell us that we do not need any special gifts or psychic powers. Thomas Merton writes, "Meditation is really very simple and there is not much need of elaborate techniques to teach us how to go about it."¹⁰

A third misconception is to view contemplation as impractical

and wholly out of touch with the twentieth century. There is a fear it will lead to the kind of person immortalized in Dostoevski's book *The Brothers Karamazov* in the ascetic Father Ferapont: a rigid, self-righteous person who, by sheer effort, delivers himself from the world and then calls down curses upon it. Many people believe that at its very best meditation leads to an unhealthy otherworldliness that keeps us immune to the suffering of humanity.

Such evaluations are far from the mark. In fact, meditation is the one thing that can sufficiently redirect our lives so that we can deal with human life successfully. Thomas Merton writes, "Meditation has no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted in life."¹¹ Historically, no group has stressed the need to enter into the listening silences more than the Quakers, and the result has been a vital social impact far in excess of their numbers. William Penn notes, "True godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it."¹²

Often meditation will yield insights that are deeply practical, almost mundane. Instruction will come on how to relate to your wife or husband, or how to deal with this sensitive problem or that business situation. It is wonderful when a particular meditation leads to ecstasy, but it is far more common to be given guidance in dealing with ordinary human problems. Meditation sends us into our ordinary world with greater perspective and balance.

Perhaps the most common misconception of all is to view meditation as a religious form of psychological manipulation. It may have value in dropping our blood pressure or in relieving tension. It may even provide us with meaningful insights by helping us get in touch with our subconscious mind. But the idea of actual contact and communion with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sounds unscientific and faintly unreasonable. If you feel that we live in a purely physical universe, you will view meditation as a good way to obtain a consistent alpha brain-wave pattern. But if you believe that we live

in a universe created by the infinite-personal God who delights in our communion with him, you will see meditation as communication between the Lover and the one beloved.

These two concepts of meditation are complete opposites. The one confines us to a totally human experience; the other catapults us into a divine-human encounter. The one talks about the exploration of the subconscious; the other speaks of "resting in him whom we have found, who loves us, who is near to us, who comes to us to draw us to himself."¹³ Both may sound religious and even use religious jargon, but the former can ultimately find no place for spiritual reality.

How then do we come to believe in a world of the spirit? Is it by blind faith? Not at all. The inner reality of the spiritual world is available to all who are willing to search for it. Often I have discovered that those who so freely debunk the spiritual world have never taken ten minutes to investigate whether or not such a world really exists.

Let me suggest we take an experiential attitude toward spiritual realities. Like any other scientific endeavor, we form a hypothesis and experiment with it to see if it is true or not. If our first experiment fails, we do not despair or label the whole business fraudulent. We reexamine our procedure, perhaps adjust our hypothesis, and try again. We should at least have the honesty to persevere in this work to the same degree we would in any field of science. The fact that so many are unwilling to do so betrays not their intelligence but their prejudice.

Desiring the Living Voice of God

There are times when everything within us says yes to the words of Frederick W. Faber:

Only to sit and think of God,
Oh what a joy it is!
To think the thought, to breathe the Name
Earth has no higher bliss.¹⁴

But those who meditate know that the more frequent reaction is spiritual inertia, a coldness and lack of desire. Human beings seem to have a perpetual tendency to have somebody else talk to God for them. We are content to have the message second-hand. One of Israel's fatal mistakes was their insistence upon having a human king rather than resting in the theocratic rule of God over them. We can detect a note of sadness in the word of the Lord, "They have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sam. 8:7). The history of religion is the story of an almost desperate scramble to have a king, a mediator, a priest, a pastor, a go-between. In this way we do not need to go to God ourselves. Such an approach saves us from the need to change, for to be in the presence of God is to change. We do not need to observe Western culture very closely to realize that it is captivated by the religion of the mediator.

That is why meditation is so threatening to us. It boldly calls us to enter into the living presence of God for ourselves. It tells us that God is speaking in the continuous present and wants to address us. Jesus and the New Testament writers clearly state that this is not just for the religious professionals—the priests—but for everyone. *All* who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord *are* the universal priesthood of God and as such can enter the Holy of Holies and converse with the living God.

To bring people to believe that *they* can hear God's voice seems so difficult. Members of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C., have been experimenting in this area for some time. Their conclusion: "We think that we are twentieth- and twenty-first-century people; nonetheless, we have hints that one can receive directions as clear as those given Ananias, . . . 'Rise and go to the street called straight.' "15 Why not? If God is alive and active in the affairs of human beings, why can't his voice be heard and obeyed today? It can be heard and is heard by all who will know him as present Teacher and Prophet.

How do we receive the desire to hear his voice? "This desire to turn is a gift of grace. Anyone who imagines he can simply

begin meditating without praying for the desire and the grace to do so, will soon give up. But the desire to meditate, and the grace to begin meditating, should be taken as an implicit promise of further graces."¹⁶ Seeking and receiving that "gift of grace" is the only thing that will keep us moving forward on the inward journey. And as Albert the Great says, "The contemplation of the saints is fired by the love of the one contemplated: that is, God."¹⁷

Sanctifying the Imagination

We can descend with the mind into the heart most easily through the imagination. In this regard the great Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte speaks of "the divine offices and the splendid services of the Christian imagination."¹⁸ Perhaps some rare individuals experience God through abstract contemplation alone, but most of us need to be more deeply rooted in the senses. We must not despise this simpler, more humble route into God's presence. Jesus himself taught in this manner, making constant appeal to the imagination, and many of the devotional masters likewise encourage us in this way. St. Teresa of Avila says, ". . . as I could not make reflection with my understanding I contrived to picture Christ within me."¹⁹ Many of us can identify with her words, for we too have tried a merely cerebral approach and found it too abstract, too detached. Even more, the imagination helps to anchor our thoughts and center our attention. Francis de Sales notes that "by means of the imagination we confine our mind within the mystery on which we meditate, that it may not ramble to and fro, just as we shut up a bird in a cage or tie a hawk by his leash so that he may rest on the hand."²⁰

Some have objected to using the imagination out of concern that it is untrustworthy and could even be used by the Evil One. There is good reason for concern, for the imagination, like all our faculties, has participated in the Fall. But just as we can believe that God can take our reason (fallen as it is) and

sanctify it and use it for his good purposes, so we believe he can sanctify the imagination and use it for his good purposes. Of course, the imagination can be distorted by Satan, but then so can all our faculties. God created us with an imagination, and as Lord of his creation he can and does redeem it and use it for the work of the kingdom of God.

Another concern about the use of the imagination is the fear of human manipulation and even self-deception. After all, some have an "overactive imagination," as we say, and they can concoct all kinds of images of what they would like to see happen. Besides, doesn't the Bible warn against "the vain imaginations" of the wicked (Rom. 1:21)? The concern is legitimate. It is possible for all of this to be nothing more than vain human strivings. That is why it is so vitally important for us to be thrown in utter dependence upon God in these matters. We are seeking to think God's thoughts after him, to delight in his presence, to desire his truth and his way. And the more we live in this way, the more God utilizes our imagination for his good purposes. In fact, the common experience of those who walk with God is one of being *given* images of what can be. Often in praying for people I am given a picture of their condition, and when I share that picture with them, there will be a deep inner sigh, or they will begin weeping. Later they will ask, "How did you know?" Well, I didn't know, I just saw it.

To believe that God can sanctify and utilize the imagination is simply to take seriously the Christian idea of incarnation. God so accommodates, so enfleashes himself into our world that he uses the images we know and understand to teach us about the unseen world of which we know so little and which we find so difficult to understand.

Preparing to Meditate

It is impossible to learn how to meditate from a book. We learn to meditate by meditating. Simple suggestions at the right time, however, can make an immense difference. The practical

hints and meditation exercises on the following pages are given in the hope that they may help in the actual practice of meditation. They are not laws nor are they intended to confine you.

Is there a proper *time* for meditation? When a certain proficiency has been attained in the interior life, it is possible to practice meditation at any time and under almost every circumstance. Brother Lawrence in the seventeenth century and Thomas Kelly in the twentieth both bear eloquent testimony to this fact. Having said that, however, we must see the importance for beginners and experts alike to give some part of each day to formal meditation.

Once we are convinced that we need to set aside specific times for contemplation, we must guard against the notion that to do certain religious acts at particular times means that we are finally meditating. This work involves all of life. It is a twenty-four-hour-a-day job. Contemplative prayer is a way of life. "Pray without ceasing," Paul exhorts (1 Thess. 5:17, KJV). With a touch of humor Peter of Celles notes that "he who snores in the night of vice cannot know the light of contemplation."²¹

We must come to see, therefore, how central our whole day is in preparing us for specific times of meditation. If we are constantly being swept off our feet with frantic activity, we will be unable to be attentive at the moment of inward silence. A mind that is harassed and fragmented by external affairs is hardly prepared for meditation. The church Fathers often spoke of *Otium Sanctum*, "holy leisure." It refers to a sense of balance in the life, an ability to be at peace through the activities of the day, an ability to rest and take time to enjoy beauty, an ability to pace ourselves. With our tendency to define people in terms of what they produce, we would do well to cultivate "holy leisure." And if we expect to succeed in the contemplative way, we must pursue "holy leisure" with a determination that is ruthless to our datebooks.

What about a *place* for meditation? This will be discussed under the Discipline of solitude so for now a few words will

be sufficient. Find a place that is quiet and free from interruption. No telephone should be nearby. If it is possible to find some place that looks out onto a lovely landscape, so much the better. It is best to have one designated place rather than hunting for a different spot each day.

What about *posture*? In one sense posture makes no difference at all; you can pray anywhere, any time, and in any position. In another sense, however, posture is of utmost importance. The body, the mind, and the spirit are inseparable. Tension in the spirit is telegraphed in body language. I actually have witnessed people go through an entire worship service vigorously chewing gum without the slightest awareness of their deep inner tension. Not only does outward posture reflect the inward state, it can also help to nurture the inner attitude of prayer. If inwardly we are fraught with distractions and anxiety, a consciously chosen posture of peace and relaxation will have a tendency to calm our inner turmoil.

There is no "law" that prescribes a correct posture. The Bible contains everything from lying prostrate on the floor to standing with hands and head lifted toward the heavens. I think the best approach would be to find a position that is the most comfortable and the least distracting. The delightful fourteenth-century mystic, Richard Rolle, favored sitting, "... because I knew that I . . . longer lasted . . . than going, or standing or kneeling. For [in] sitting I am most at rest, and my heart most upward."²² I quite agree, and find it best to sit in a straight chair, with my back correctly positioned in the chair and both feet flat on the floor. To slouch indicates inattention and to cross the legs restricts the circulation. Place the hands on the knees, palms up in a gesture of receptivity. Sometimes it is good to close the eyes to remove distractions and center the attention on Christ. At other times it is helpful to ponder a picture of the Lord or to look out at some lovely trees and plants for the same purpose. Regardless of how it is done, the aim is to center the attention of the body, the emotions, the mind, and the spirit upon "the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

The Forms of Meditation

Christians throughout the centuries have spoken of a variety of ways of listening to God, of communing with the Creator of heaven and earth, of experiencing the eternal Lover of the world. The accumulated wisdom of their experience can be immensely helpful as we, like them, seek intimacy with God and faithfulness to God.

For all the devotional masters the *meditatio Scripturarum*, the meditation upon Scripture, is the central reference point by which all other forms of meditation are kept in proper perspective. Whereas the study of Scripture centers on exegesis, the meditation of Scripture centers on internalizing and personalizing the passage. The written Word becomes a living word addressed to you. This is not a time for technical studies, or analysis, or even the gathering of material to share with others. Set aside all tendencies toward arrogance and with a humble heart receive the word addressed to you. Often I find kneeling especially appropriate for this particular time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "... just as you do not analyze the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all. That is meditation."²³ When Bonhoeffer founded the seminary at Finkenwalde, a one-half hour silent meditation upon Scripture was practiced by everyone.

It is important to resist the temptation to pass over many passages superficially. Our rushing reflects our internal state and our internal state is what needs to be transformed. Bonhoeffer recommended spending a whole week on a single text! Therefore, my suggestion is that you take a single event, or a parable, or a few verses, or even a single word and allow it to take root in you. Seek to live the experience, remembering the encouragement of Ignatius of Loyola to apply all our senses to our task. Smell the sea. Hear the lap of water along the shore. See the crowd. Feel the sun on your head and the hunger in your stomach. Taste the salt in the air. Touch the hem of his

garment. In this regard Alexander Whyte counsels us, "... the truly Christian imagination never lets Jesus Christ out of her sight. . . . You open your New Testament. . . . And, by your imagination, that moment you are one of Christ's disciples on the spot, and are at His feet."²⁴

Suppose we want to meditate on Jesus' staggering statement, "My peace I give to you" (John 14:27). Our task is not so much to study the passage as it is to be initiated into the reality of which the passage speaks. We brood on the truth that he is now filling us with his peace. The heart, the mind, and the spirit are awakened to his inflowing peace. We sense all motions of fear stilled and overcome by "power and love and self-control" (2 Tim. 1:7). Rather than dissecting peace we are entering into it. We are enveloped, absorbed, gathered into his peace. And the wonderful thing about such an experience is that the self is quite forgotten. We are no longer worried about how we can make ourselves more at peace, for we are attending to the impartation of peace within our hearts. No longer do we laboriously think up ways to act peacefully, for acts of peace spring spontaneously from within.

Always remember that we enter the story not as passive observers, but as active participants. Also remember that Christ is truly with us to teach us, to heal us, to forgive us. Alexander Whyte declares, "with your imagination anointed with holy oil, you again open your New Testament. At one time, you are the publican: at another time, you are the prodigal. . . . at another time, you are Mary Magdalene: at another time, Peter in the porch. . . . Till your whole New Testament is all over autobiographic of you."²⁵

Another form of meditation is what the contemplatives of the Middle Ages called "re-collection," and what the Quakers have often called "centering down." It is a time to become still, to enter into the recreating silence, to allow the fragmentation of our minds to become centered.

The following is a brief exercise to aid you in "re-collection" that is simply called "palms down, palms up." Begin by placing

your palms down as a symbolic indication of your desire to turn over any concerns you may have to God. Inwardly you may pray, "Lord, I give to you my anger toward John. I release my fear of my dentist appointment this morning. I surrender my anxiety over not having enough money to pay the bills this month. I release my frustration over trying to find a baby-sitter for tonight." Whatever it is that weighs on your mind or is a concern to you, just say, "palms down." Release it. You may even feel a certain sense of release in your hands. After several moments of surrender, turn your palms up as a symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord. Perhaps you will pray silently: "Lord, I would like to receive your divine love for John, your peace about the dentist appointment, your patience, your joy." Whatever you need, you say, "palms up." Having centered down, spend the remaining moments in complete silence. Do not ask for anything. Allow the Lord to commune with you, to love you. If impressions or directions come, fine; if not, fine.

A third kind of contemplative prayer is meditation upon the creation. Now, this is no infantile pantheism, but a majestic monotheism in which the great Creator of the universe shows us something of his glory through his creation. The heavens do indeed declare the glory of God and the firmament does show forth his handiwork (Ps. 19:1). Evelyn Underhill recommends, ". . . begin with that first form of contemplation which the old mystics sometimes called 'the discovery of God in his creatures.'²⁶

So give your attention to the created order. Look at the trees, really look at them. Take a flower and allow its beauty and symmetry to sink deep into your mind and heart. Listen to the birds—they are the messengers of God. Watch the little creatures that creep upon the earth. These are humble acts, to be sure, but sometimes God reaches us profoundly in these simple ways if we will quiet ourselves to listen.

There is a fourth form of meditation that is in some ways quite the opposite of the one just given. It is to meditate upon the events of our time and to seek to perceive their significance.

We have a spiritual obligation to penetrate the inner meaning of events, not to gain power but to gain prophetic perspective. Thomas Merton writes that the person "... who has meditated on the Passion of Christ but has not meditated on the extermination camps of Dachau and Auschwitz has not yet fully entered into the experience of Christianity in our time."²⁷

This form of meditation is best accomplished with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other! You must not, however, be controlled by the absurd political clichés and propaganda fed us today. Actually, newspapers are generally far too shallow and slanted to be of much help. We would do well to hold the events of our time before God and ask for prophetic insight to discern where these things lead. Further, we should ask for guidance for anything we personally should be doing to be salt and light in our decaying and dark world.

You must not be discouraged if in the beginning your meditations have little meaning to you. There is a progression in the spiritual life, and it is wise to have some experience with lesser peaks before trying to tackle the Mt. Everest of the soul. So be patient with yourself. Besides, you are learning a discipline for which you have received no training. Nor does our culture encourage you to develop these skills. You will be going against the tide, but take heart; your task is of immense worth.

There are many other aspects of the Discipline of meditation that could be profitably considered.* However, meditation is not a single act, nor can it be completed the way one completes the building of a chair. It is a way of life. You will be constantly learning and growing as you plumb the inner depths.

*Two topics that closely impinge upon meditation will be discussed under the Discipline of solitude: the creative use of silence and the concept developed by St. John of the Cross that he graphically calls "the dark night of the soul."