

MEDITATION AND ACTION: BOTH SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

By PAUL T. HARRIS

The practice of Christian Meditation raises the age-old question of whether one is spiritually enriching one's life or escaping from it; whether one is preparing for greater service to others or being selfishly introspective. One woman recently said to a meditator, "I just don't trust that meditation business. It's like sitting in a cave and contemplating your belly button while the rest of the world goes hungry." All of us who are meditating at one time or another, usually have to face friends and family who are often suspicious and mistrustful of what is happening to us on the meditative journey. Everyone is looking to see if we are using prayer as an escape.

John Main was quite adamant that meditation, far from being an escape from life, actually propels one to love and compassion for others. In Letters from the Heart he wrote: "It often seems to many people that prayer is an introspective state and that the meditator is someone going into himself to the exclusion of the people and creation around him, that he is socially illrelevant. Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only is the timeless contemplative vision the necessary basis for contemporary action but it is the essential condition for a fully human response to life". Father John goes on to point out that "because meditation leads us into the experience of love at the centre of our being, it makes us more loving people in our ordinary lives and relationships".

Father William Johnson in his book "Silent Music" also faces this problem head on when he says: "In the final analysis meditation is a love affair. And love is the most powerful energy in the universe. The great irony of meditation is that we become more immersed in the here-and-now. We are liberated from our false egos, and begin to know and love others at a deeper level of awareness. Liberated from our possessiveness we reach out with a new found compassion to our family, friends, the less fortunate."

The personal fruits of the spirit and of prayer include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5: 19-23) But these fruits often also include a call to action. As Father Johnson points out, the flame of love that springs from prayer can suddenly burst forth. Like the prophets of old, the person of prayer often has an inner eye awakened to suffering and injustice in the world and suddenly discovers that he/she cannot refuse the call to action. The path of meditation often leads to a compassion for the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the weak, the underprivileged.

Are meditators divorced from reality? John Main keeps reminding us that the opposite is true, that meditation draws us into reality itself. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dag Hammarskjold, Mother Teresa, Thomas Merton and John Main all speak to us of a prayer life integrated with service to others. And apart from these spiritual giants there are a

host of meditators around the world who integrate their daily meditation with love, commitment and service to family and community.

Another author, Morton Kelsey in his book "The other side of silence - a guide to Christian meditation", puts it in another way: "Our prayer life and our actions.... The two, cannot be separated for they are of the same fabric. What we do with our lives outwardly, how well we care for others, is as much a part of meditation as what we do in quietness and turning inward. In fact, Christian meditation that does not make a difference in the quality of one's outer life is short-circuited. It may flare for a while, but unless it results in finding richer and more loving relationships with other human beings or in changing conditions in the world that cause human suffering, the chances are that an individual's prayer activity will fizzle out."

For all of us who are meditating it is important to remember that we cannot enjoy the silence and stillness while ignoring our worldly affairs and responsibilities. This would be a delusion. Benedictine monk Cyprian Smith underlines this in a book "The Way of Paradox" when he says: "But we must be careful not to become fixated on the inward realm either. The external world, though inferior, is real and has its rights. God is present in both worlds, and we have to learn to find Him in both. Fixated on the outer world, we retreat

into the inner; fixated on the inner, we turn again to the outer. God is then present to us everywhere, both in and out of meditation".

In meditation there is an awakening of the inner eye, the eye of the heart, the inner eye of love. This is the metonia or conversion that is beautifully described by Ezekiel (36: 26, 27). "A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone ... and I will put my spirit within you". This is the gospel cry of Jesus "change your hearts for the kingdom of heaven is at hand". (Matthew 3:2). On the journey of meditation the inner eye of love transforms our hearts and we are led into a life of fruitful action. For without prayer our actions can be very sterile. The important thing here is the love with which we perform our action; "a love which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7).

It would seem there is unanimity that Love in action and prayer are one. In St. Paul there was no schizophrenic cleavage between his relationship with God and his relationship with people. It was all one. Life was flowing into his prayer as his prayer flowed into life. The loving presence of God experienced in meditation is also experienced and shared in the hurly-burly of life. This is the ideal of prayer in action.

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