

Preparing to Listen to God: Prayer Intermediate between Active and Listening Prayer (Chpt 4)

A. Prayer Grounded in Visualization

When working with nonverbal symbols, it is important “not to be arbitrary, but to be aware of an image or symbol that already speaks or resonates within you as a pointer to profound meaning for you – yet does not compel reflective thought. Then you can allow it to be the fixed point that will arrest your attention and the ground from which opening into prayer may arise spontaneously within you” (p. 74).

1. Extending Projection or transposition

On p. 73, Loring offers “a number of ways in which people begin their prayer from one meditative focus or another, usually allowing prayer to open spontaneously from their meditation” (e.g., “beginning with scripture, with an *examen* or with your own Quaker journal”, “projecting yourself into a story (Bible or other) as one or more of the participants”).

2. Praying with Images or Visual Symbols

When working with icons and other images of God, the “challenge is to look through the material – not at it – to divinity, to eternity. In this (Eastern Orthodox) spirituality, the icon is a window through which eternity can be viewed and through which one can be viewed by eternity” (p. 75).

B. Icons and Idols

P. L. warns us that we should not let certain objects (e.g., possessions, sexual stimulation, power, status, or reputation) “become over-mastering desires that control us, obsessions or, in more subtle ways, take the place of God in orienting and organizing our lives for us” (p. 76). She reminds us that whatever “takes over the ultimate position of God in orienting and patterning our desires and our lives can fairly be called an idol” (p. 76)

C. Prayer of the Heart

In this section the author discusses prayers which “begin with a repetition of some kind, usually deeply associated with breathing and carrying the prayer on the breath” (p. 78). Since these practices can lead to repetitions which are not “expressive of the heart”, the challenge is “to discern whether they do, in fact, express and support the deepest longings of your heart” (p. 78). “Prayers of the heart” can take many forms, including the following:

1. Prayer that Opens from Chanting

Chanting is one way to allow one’s spiritual “intentionality to unfurl” (p. 79). Since “chanting rests on attention to breath”, it “is one way we can experience the intimacy of the link between body, mind and spirit” (p. 79).

Loring points out that the “rhythmic repetition can focus the attention, cutting the thread of mind chatter. The content can orient intentionality toward God, toward some divine quality or towards some spiritual truth that speaks from or to your condition at the time” (p. 76)

2. Prayer Involving Mantras

According to P. L., the “word ‘mantra’ is borrowed from Hindu tradition where it names a phrase or sentence addressed to or describing divinity, which has particular significance for the person who uses or carries it...Unlike chant, the mantra does not need to be vocalized, although it may be, when you are just beginning to use it, or at special times of devotion” (p. 80).

3. The Jesus Prayer

In this section, Loring describes the specific prayer of the heart which has developed in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. The Jesus Prayer is derived from Luke 18: 9-14 (the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector) and consists of repeating this phrase without ceasing: “Lord

Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” (p. 82). Like other prayers of the heart, it is hoped that by repeating this phrase with devotional sincerity, it will become “as constant as the breath itself” and requiring “as little effort of will” (p. 82).

4. Prayer Using a Word

Another major direction has been to use names or qualities of God repetitively on the breath, as an invocation or expression of longing for God... (Each name) may be repeated on the inhalation, the exhalation or divided between the two” (p. 83).

The practice offered by the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing is also described. This prayer of the heart involves taking a single, one-syllable word, preferably one that is “a simple, bare expression of our intentionality, the desire to redirect, reorient, recenter our being, the openness to be repatterned at the deepest level of our being” (p. 83). The recommendation is to use “the word as a focus in times of unambiguous prayer, to press forward, past thoughts of ourselves or God, past sensible intimations of God’s presence, into the nakedness of unknowing, toward God’s own unknowable self” (p. 83).

D. Active Meditation in Eastern Styles

1. Some Uses of the Word “Meditation”

P. L. distinguishes between the **active** meditation found in western traditions and eastern meditations which are typically “nondiscursive” - and sometimes imageless – forms of practice. The intention is to foster wider, clearer awareness and responsiveness, whether in or out of the time of meditation” (p. 85). In contrast to western forms of meditation, eastern practices tend to be less goal-oriented and less involved with “any explicitly spiritual intention” (p. 85).

Loring points out that “many Friends have found some eastern meditative practices, especially the emptying Buddhist practices, useful as a quieting, opening preparation for their own waiting meditations and worship... One important difference is that while Friends accept the necessity of the effort to come to stillness, they feel they cannot achieve stillness without divine assistance” (p. 86). Moreover, in contrast to Buddhists, Quakers have “confidence in the availability of authentic intimations and guidance of God through our human faculties that is the cornerstone of Quakerism” (pp. 86-87). Another difference is that Friends “work within a tradition that accepts a personalness in divinity, engaged with us in our salvation – rather than an impersonal ultimate reality that one seeks to enter” (p. 87).

2. The Assistance of the Body in Preparing for Meditation

“Whereas western traditions often prepare for meditation or prayer by reading, in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the preparation for meditation is likely to be physical, focusing on breathing, movement or some other aspect of awareness. These help the mind to begin to detach from past and future desires, fears and outward preoccupations in general” (p. 87).

3. Quieting or Stilling Meditation

“Awareness of the breath is one kind of body awareness. So, also, is noticing the points of fatigue that might benefit from a massage. Both of these exercises can begin to take us out of our mental busyness by focusing our attention on some simple, physical sensation” (p. 89).

P. L. also discusses watching one’s thoughts as meditation and becoming aware of one’s emotions (see pp. 90-92).

E. Centering Prayer

Loring sees centering prayer “as a way of cooperating with the leading into contemplative prayer, if and when it comes” (p. 93). It consists of the following elements: “(1) Relaxation; (2) A relaxed attentiveness, rather than tense concentration; (3) A focus on the breath, an image or a word as expression of one’s intentionality; (4) Letting go of the focus on breath, image or word to stay with naked intentionality – as possible; (5) Remaining aware of the passage of sensations, thought, or feelings, without entering into them; (and 6) Returning to the focus as needed to stay in touch with intentionality, always relinquishing it as possible” (p. 93).