

Discourse eight:

Solitary Religious Practice

Spirit is like a billion-dollar gold mine hiding in a particular field. A renter of that field uncovers the gold. When he sees the vast treasure this field contains, he buries it again and sells **all that he has** to buy that field. Jesus told a parable like this. Here is the point of the parable: Spirit aliveness is so valuable to the wise person, that everything else in life could be meaningfully sacrificed in order to buy Spirit aliveness.

This parable also indicates that the Spirit life requires something of us. Spirit is a gift, but it must be bought. We do indeed have to sell everything to buy the gift of Spirit. Living the Spirit life requires effort. The effort does not earn us the gift of Spirit. The effort is the response needed to accept the gift. This effort might be called “religion.”

Spirit and Religion

Spirit is a gift from the Infinite, and Spirit is sustained by the Infinite. Hence, Spirit requires nothing from finite humanity to create it. Religion is a finite practice by human beings; religion is the practice required to accept the gift of Spirit. The practice of religion comes after the gift of Spirit, and the practice of religion comes before the next gift of Spirit. Religion is an expression of the Spirit we have been given, and religion is a practice which leads to the expansion of Spirit in our lives.

We might also say that religion is a practice session, practice for our living of Spirit in the full round of our lives. Like playing a musical instrument, practicing prepares us for our serious performances. Religion is the practice; life is the concert. Perhaps the practice of religion and the living of Spirit blur together, for all practice, if it is good practice, is a type of concert on its own terms. And even a concert might be seen as practice for the next concert. Yet there is a difference between Spirit living and religious practice. Spirit living is the serious matter. Religion is just practice.

Religion cannot force Spirit to be given. And Spirit is often given without any practice of religion taking place. Nevertheless, the person who is serious about Spirit living must also be serious about the practice of religion. Spirit is not the sort of dynamic that is forced upon us without our participation. We are not Spirit persons in a robot fashion. We must choose to be the Spirit potentialities that are bestowed upon us. The disciplines of religious practice are part of this participation, part of this choosing to be the Spirit that is bestowed upon us.

I want to look first at solitary religious practice. Without the solitary disciplines of religion, the public or communal practice of religion disintegrates into a herd brainwash, a group think, an empty ritual, or even a mass hysteria.

I want to propose an overview of solitary religious practice that includes these three components: (1) **dialogue** with voices other than one’s own--dialogue with mature Spirit persons who enable us to listen to the Infinite Silence and talk back; (2) **prayer as free decision** directed toward the Infinite--actively asking the Determiner of our daily destiny for specific outcomes and watching for the answer; (3) **meditation**, sometimes also called “contemplation.” The next three sections of this discourse are reflections on these three dimensions of solitary religious practice.

Listening to the Infinite Silence and Talking Back

Our lives are composed of hundreds of ongoing dialogues. We are a matrix of dialogues with our parents, our teachers, our students, our children, our friends, our enemies, with all the beings and all the cultural deposits that make up our practical finite lives.

Some of these dialogues are with persons who have awakened to their Spirit nature. Our dialogues with Spirit-awake persons are usually crucial to our Spirit awakening and maturation. Each of us has the ability to make these fruitful dialogues intentional. We can choose to read Spirit works, attend Spirit speeches, talk personally with Spirit friends.

Imagine yourself alone in your own room. You are listening to the buzz of voices in your own head. All the persons in your life speak to you when you are alone as well as when you are with them. These interior voices are part of your treasury for being human. These interior voices instruct you on how to live your life. But you must choose which voices to hear and how to hear them and how to use what you have heard. Sometimes we allow our lives to be run by our inner voices rather than taking charge of our voices and using them to help us to run our own lives.

Imagine yourself calling an assembly in your own head of all the voices you consider relevant to your current living. You are in charge of this meeting. You are in charge of who sits on the front rows and talks the most and who sits on the back rows and talks the least. You listen to them, but you listen to them in the context of your questions, your needs, your next decisions. You ask them to speak, and you shut them up when you have heard enough. You decide what “enough” means. You are in charge of this interior council of invited voices.

Now imagine yourself noticing that some of these voices are especially powerful in helping you to “listen” to the Mouthless Mouth of the Infinite Silence. Between the lines of their finite words leaks the Speech of the Infinite. How do you know when you are hearing the Infinite? You are filled with Awe. And what is Awe? Awe is dread of the Void and Fullness encountering your life. Awe is also fascination with the Void and Fullness encountering your life. And thirdly, Awe is the courage to experience that dread and that fascination. Without the leap of courage, Awe does not actually happen. Without the courage to be in Awe, the dread and fascination of your life is suppressed and the undisturbed busyness or slump of your merely finite course of events distracts you from the Awe in your particular moments of living.

So the purpose of a solitary practice of religion of this first type is to allow the appropriate voices to speak to you, to the end that the Speech of the Infinite Silence also be heard. Then you can speak back to the Infinite Silence. You have your own conversation with the Infinite about your own life as an **ongoing dialogue** with the Infinite. How do you conduct that dialogue? Perhaps you write down something in your journal. Perhaps you compose a poem. Perhaps you write a Psalm. Perhaps you simply read a Psalm from the Bible until that Psalm is expressing your dialogue with the Infinite. No literature in the world is more in tune with this dynamic of dialogue with the Infinite than the Psalms.

If you are facing or contemplating your own death, you might find that Psalm 90 expresses the dialogue you are having with the Infinite.

Psalms are meant to be read orally. I have inserted “. . .” to indicate pauses in the oral reading

Infinite Silence, . . . You have been like a fortress to us
from generation to generation. . . .

Before the mountains were brought forth, . . .
or earth and world were born from the chaos, . . .
from age to age everlasting, . . .
You . . . are in command.

You turn humans back to the dust; . . .
“Turn back,” You say, “you offspring of humanity;” . . .
In Your sight a thousand years are as yesterday; . . .
but a night-watch passes, and You have ended the lives of human beings;
they are like a dream at daybreak, . . .
they fade like grass which springs up with the morning, . . .
but when evening comes is parched and withered. . . .

Yes, we are brought to an end by Your anger. . . .
and silenced by Your wrath. . . .
You lay bare our illusory living before Your gaze,
and our temporal addictions are exposed in the light of Your presence. . . .

All our days go by under the shadow of Your wrath. . . .
Our years die away like a murmur. . . .
Seventy years is the span of our life,
eighty if our strength holds; . . .
furthermore, the hurrying years are labor and sorrow, . . .
so quickly they pass and are forgotten. . . .

Who feels the power of Your anger, . . .
who feels Your wrath like those that worship You? . . .
Teach us to count carefully our days . . .
that we may have a heart of wisdom.

Or perhaps you want to remember that this same Infinite Reality who is perpetual wrath toward your addictions to the finite aspects of your life is also your Source of power and freedom in each and every circumstance. Here is Psalm 23:

The Infinite Silence is like a shepherd to me; . . .
I lack nothing. . . .
The Infinite Silence rests me in green pastures,
and leads me to safe water holes. . . .
The Infinite Silence renews life within me, . . .
and, for the sake of The Infinite Silence's own reputation,
guides me in the right path. . . .

The Psalmist next dialogues directly with the Infinite Silence:

Even though I walk through a valley dark as death, . . .
I fear no evil; . . . for You are with me. . . .
Your rod and Your staff are my comfort. . . .
You spread a table for me in the sight of my enemies; . . .
You have richly bathed my head with honor, . . .
my cup runs over. . . .

The Psalmist then dialogues again with humanity about the Infinite Silence:

Goodness and love unfailing, . . .
these . . . will follow me all the days of my life, . . .

and I shall reside in the house of the Infinite Silence . . .
my whole . . . life . . . long.

These dialogical poems are finite religious means for enabling us to be present to the dialogues with the Infinite going on in our here-and-now lives. This same purpose can inform all our time spent in devotional reading, whether it be Scriptures, Christian tradition, or any other Spirit-evoking writings.

The dialogue type of solitary practice can also be manifest in doing **writing**. Perhaps all creative writing tends to have an audience in mind. In our solitary religious practice, we can include the Infinite Silence among our audiences. The Infinite Silence is a very good listener--never interrupts--rejoices in our honesty.

If, during our devotional writing, we call to mind particular human beings or groups of human beings, we do not have to worry about how they are going to respond. Devotional writing is our own interior dialogue. Such dialogue is our own solitary exploration. If later we choose to use some of this writing to communicate with others, that is another choice. In a proper solitary practice, we are not focused on the responses of others; we are focused upon being and becoming the Spirit relatednesses that we actually are.

Asking the Determiner and Watching for the Answer

While dialogue is listening and responding, **prayer**, our second type of religious practice, is **action**. "Prayer" is a much misunderstood religious term. Prayer, properly understood, is not the magical manipulation of whatever Divine powers there may be. Prayer is the exercise of our own freedom. The very decision to pray is prayer. Our prayer can be a groan too deep for words. Our prayer can be a silence we choose as the conscious content of this moment. Prayer is freedom. And true freedom is always a response to the Infinite Silence. Freedom is the gift of the Infinite Silence bubbling up inside of us as our own boundless volition to move not only toward specific outcomes but to move toward being, in specific ways, some next edition of our finite personhood. Deepest of all, prayer is the freedom of choosing freedom itself.

Prayer does indeed change things, for being our freedom changes actual outcomes. Our lives are not fated like a needle in a mechanical groove. Our lives are not robots directed by other forces (unless we have sold out our freedom and allowed other forces to run our lives). Our lives in their Spirit essence are freedom. Our choices matter. Our choices determine in some measure what actual outcomes the Infinite Silence determines next.

Though we never know exactly how our acts of freedom are going to work out in actual results, we do know that things work out differently because we decide. We are freedom, and as such we are determiners of history. We are co-creators (with the Infinite Silence) of our daily destinies. We are co-creators (with the Infinite Silence) in the destiny of this entire planet. So, if praying is freedom, praying is a potent force in the course of events.

We can also say that all freedom is prayer. To pray without ceasing means nothing more and nothing less than being our freedom all the time.

Further, all acts of freedom can be viewed as requests to the Infinite Determiner of all outcomes. If, for example, I step off the curb and see a car approaching, my free act of stepping back up on the curb is a request to the Determiner that I not be hit. This request may or may not come to pass. The oncoming car might veer up over the curb and hit me

after all. If I am playing a basketball game, I might request that I win. I may or may not win. But if I do not choose to win, then I am probably playing in a half-hearted manner which is a sloppy way to play a competitive game. And if I do pray (intend) to win, this request has a greater likelihood of being granted. Freedom changes things.

Some of us have had difficulty talking about a “Determiner” of our daily and planetary destinies because we think this contradicts our freedom and makes us victims. But this is a misunderstanding that arises because we do not take notice that the Determiner is determining us to be our freedom. That is, we are determined to participate in what is being determined in actual outcomes. No sane human can claim to be in absolute control of all outcomes. A human being is finite, not infinite. But on the other hand, no sane human can claim a lack of participation in all outcomes. We are responsible for each and every outcome while at the same time we are not in absolute control. We pray for specific outcomes, and sometimes we get what we pray for. But at other times we get something else. If we trust the Infinite Determiner, we are open to get what we ask for and we are also open to get whatever we get.

Prayer is like a golf stroke: (1) there is the back swing of seeing ourselves as a co-determiner with the Infinite Determiner, (2) there is the down swing of requesting a particular request, and (3) there is the follow-through of releasing the outcome of the request to the Infinite Determiner who has the final say on all outcomes.

Classical Christian liturgical heritage has distinguished between petitionary and intercessory prayers. **Petitionary prayers** are requests for our own person, for our own wellbeing, for personally favorable outcomes, for health, for enlightenment, for courage, for faith, freedom, or love, etc. **Intercessory prayers** are requests for other persons, entire social wholes, or natural systems. “Interceding” means that we place ourselves between the Infinite Determiner and that other for whom we are praying. We put our body, mind, soul, and Spirit on the front lines in making a request to the Determiner for a different destiny for our friend, our enemy, our society, or our planet. Prayer understood as freedom changes things. Being freedom is the only way that human beings do change things.

The classical Christian liturgical heritage has also spoken of **prayers of confession**. These prayers are also acts of freedom. When I do a prayer of confession, I make a free decision to own up to my limitations, to my violations of principle, to my estrangements from being my true Spirit self. My free acts of acknowledgement presuppose the faith that I am forgiven, that I am welcome home to my actual reality as a Spirit relationship with the Infinite Silence. Owning up to our unfreedom in the context of forgiveness is an act of freedom that changes things. Such acts of freedom, can make huge changes in the way we operate and in the way our destinies work out. The opposite of praying prayers of confession is what we call defensiveness and suppression. The life of a defensive and/or unconscious person has a different outcome than the life of one who confesses--that is, who acknowledges his or her limitations, violations of principle, and estrangements from being Spirit freedom.

Finally, a **prayer of gratitude** is also an act of freedom moving toward the full celebration of our actual lives. The opposite of being grateful for our lives is our slothful indulgence in victim images and complaining. When we practice gratitude for our lives, for our energy, our companions, our possessions, our opportunities, etc., our lives are changed. To be grateful for our hard challenges and our stern limitations changes things in a major way. When our gratitude has grown to the stage of being a wholehearted willingness to be the entire maze of relationships that we actually are, then our lives have moved into their

most remarkable states of power and victory--into a confidence that no situation can intimidate.

Prayer changes things. Freedom changes things. But how, specifically, things will change remains a surprise to be worked out through our continuing dialogue with the Infinite Silence.

Finally, we must distinguish between prayer as the presence of freedom in all our living and prayer as a **religious exercise** done at a particular time in our day. If, during the time we set aside for solitary exercises, we perform prayers, what are we doing? We are practicing freedom for the rest of lives. We are practicing freedom so that we can be freedom in the full round of our living. We are **setting our intentions** so that those intentions can be carried out in the the rest of our lives. A time set aside for setting our intentions can be very valuable. It is like programing our own psyche to operate at full potential (at full freedom-potential) in the serious living we are anticipating. Like a pianist practicing for a concert, so our periods of prayer are practice for the concerts of our lives.

Meditation: Buddhist, Christian, and Otherwise

The term “meditation” has been popularized in North America by Buddhist and other Asian teachers. Classical Christian heritage has often used the term “contemplation” to point to the types of religious practice that the Asian heritages cover with the term “meditation.” Asian meditation tends to differ somewhat from Christian contemplation. Most Buddhist meditators emphasizes silence, erect posture, and the concentrating of consciousness on breathing and other bodily sensations. Christian contemplation has often emphasized repetitive liturgical sayings.

One of the earliest contemplative devices of Christian heritage was the repetitive saying of this prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This prayer was repeated until it appeared to be ongoing or unceasing in one’s consciousness. Classical Christian liturgy shortened this prayer to the responsive: “Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.” I have found it useful to shorten this prayer even further to “Have mercy.”

When guilt of some sort begins to overwhelm me, I just say, “Have mercy.” It seems to me that I receive an instant response from the Infinite Silence who is always merciful in welcoming us home to our authenticity in spite of all our guilty behaviors.

I can certainly understand how the repetitive saying of “Have mercy” might be effective as an aid to human restoration and to the continuity and fulfillment of our Spirit consciousness. Perhaps saying “Have mercy” operates like a counteraction or contradiction to other phrases which might be our mental habits, such as: “What a sorry person I am,” “I never do anything right,” “I have a temper just like my father,” “I am naturally clumsy,” etc.

Contemplative phrases when said repetitively become virtually irrational; they assist us to move beyond reason and become more aware of the transrational nature of our relationship with the Infinite Silence. Another relatively popular Christian repetitive meditative saying is “Come Lord Jesus.” Shortened to “Come Lord” and said in Aramaic, the language of Jesus, this phrase becomes “Maranatha.” The phrase has multiple symbolic meanings: “Come Spirit relatedness into my own ordinary life,” or “Come human authenticity on the entire planet.” But saying “Maranatha” over and over soon has little or

no relationship to rational thought. It disciplines our focus on the Infinite Silence.

The repetitive saying of phrases is actually quite similar to saying no phrases at all, but simply paying attention to one's breathing and/or to one's bodily sensations. This emphasis on the breath and body sensations is being taught by the North American establishments of Vipassana, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism. I want to describe briefly the wisdom of these Buddhist meditation practices, for this further clarifies the distinction between the human dynamic of **meditation** and the human dynamics of **dialogue** and **prayer** described above.

Paying attention to your breath is perhaps the simplest of all meditative devices, so much so that the profundity of this practice is sometimes overlooked. The life of Siddhartha Gautama and millions after him were changed by noticing clearly this important psychological insight: consciousness is always rooted in the body and its sensations. The taking in of air is a sensation that goes on in the present time of each and every living person. The exhaling of air is a sensation that goes on in the present time of each and every living person. This and other bodily sensations are the roots of conscious experience. Every emotional feeling and thought is rooted in bodily sensations. Our thoughts and emotional feelings tend to be more interesting to us because they relate directly to the practical concerns of our ego. But if we want to move beyond the limitations of our ego's patterns, aversions, and attachments, and hence move beyond our ego-sufferings (that is, our despairs), we need to get back to the roots of our consciousness. The bodily sensations take us away from the ego's busy patterns to that "place" in the living here-and-now from which we can watch our feelings and thoughts arise and pass away. If we discipline our conscious attention to stay present to this flux in the living here-and-now, we become aware of the deeper actualities of our being. If, instead of identifying with and being captivated by our emotional feelings and thoughts, we simply allow them to arise and pass, we find our conscious awareness is being taught both the nature of our finite ego and how our full existence is something more than the frantic buzzing of our busy ego.

Also, Buddhist meditation practice as a whole is profoundly symbolic of living our deep life. Consider the picture of sitting in an **alert position** with shoulders and head erect while at the same time **resting** from our busy lives. As we meditate we rest from the busy work our ego does. We rest in the mindfulness that we are more than our ego. We rest in the mindfulness that we are a capacity for discipline and intentionality. We rest in this root freedom that constructs all egos, destroys all egos, reconstructs all egos. I do indeed have a personality or an ego. I am a personal set of patterns developed over the course of my life history, but this ego is not me. "I" am also a "not-ego." I am a vast potentiality for living; and each and every ego is but a narrow expression of this vastness. When people say, "I am only being myself," they usually mean, "I am only being my customary ego," rather than, "I am being my vast being." Strange as it may seem to our busy egos, the vast Self can be symbolized by being **alertly at rest** in the mundane action of watching the air come in and out of the nose.

Chogyam Trungpa, a provocative teacher of Tibetan Buddhist lineage, further illuminates this profound union of alertness and rest. In one of his descriptions of what he calls the essential goodness in the roots of every human being, Trungpa describes how we, in our ordinary lives, tend to move back and forth between alertness and rest. We strain to be alert enough to get our work done or get our crises met, and then we rest in some form of unconsciousness. We jack ourselves up to teach a course (or some other action) and then we go get drunk or do something else to rest up from the strain of being so alert. So our lives end up being a mixture of tense alertness and indulgent mindless rest. Trungpa shocks

us with the announcement that our true beings could be manifest as a full-time combination of alertness and rest. In our most pressing crises or physical strain we could also be at rest in an Eternal place from which we can be fearlessly creative and bold within that busy time of strain. In our moments of play and relaxation we could also be profoundly alert--not fleeing from mindfulness but being present to the joy and the rest of our play, sex, loafing, recuperation, feasting, or whatever non-crisis we might be experiencing. The Shambhala Warrior (Trungpa's term for "saint") never takes a vacation from being alert nor gets entangled in the busy tensions of his or her overwhelming challenges. He or she is always alert and always at rest. The Shambhala Warrior rests alertly and works restfully. Whatever comes or goes in the outward round of life, this Warrior of our essential goodness is living in the same Eternal place: alert rest and bold creativity.

Such profound living is symbolized by the mundane religious practice of sitting alert with upright head and shoulders and patiently, mindfully watching the air come in and the air go out the nose. Such meditation is only a disciplined religious practice, and yet such practice can train us for being the Warrior of Spirit in all the here-and-now moments of our living.

In the beginning, meditative practice may actualize no more than some simple psychological concentration--taming our busy minds and appropriating a bit more of our latent intentionality. But serious meditative practice can move beyond that. Meditation can become a state of being, a state of being present to the Everlasting Rest in the midst of each and every busy now. From this state of being flows gifts of pristine clarity, freedom, and compassion, gifts that are the essential dynamics of our Spirit beings.

Whether we speak of meditation or contemplation (Buddhist, Christian, or otherwise) this practice can also become practice for the moment-by-moment living of our Spirit profundity. Meditation/contemplation takes its place along with dialogue and prayer as a major type of solitary practice.

The Whole Picture of Solitary Practice

Let me return to the metaphor of practicing a musical instrument for playing at a concert. (1) The solitary exercise of dialoguing with our Spirit mentors and through them dialoguing directly with the Infinite Silence can be seen as practice for the concert of our daily lives in which dialogue characterizes all of our relationships. (2) The solitary exercise of prayer can be seen as a practice of freedom for the concert of being freedom in our daily lives. (3) And the exercise of meditation can be practice for the concert of alert equanimity in our daily living.

Finally, I want to share a way of holding in mind this whole picture of solitary religious practice: just as the whole of Spirit experience can be broken down into knowing Spirit, doing Spirit, and being Spirit, so this whole picture of solitary practice can be viewed as knowing, doing, and being activities--three inseparable poles of one whole practice.

- (1) Dialogue is the knowing pole of solitary practice.
- (2) Prayer is the doing pole of solitary practice.
- (3) Meditation is the being pole of solitary practice.

As I see it, no one of these three poles is greater than the other two. All three exist together as one interrelated dynamic. Different religious traditions emphasize them differently, name them differently, think about them differently. But if we look carefully,

we can see that all three of these dynamics are going on in the solitary practices of each profound religious lineage.

Each of us who wish to fully manifest our Spirit lives needs to construct a solitary exercise practice that works for us. I want to suggest that we need to design an appropriate (appropriate for us) combination of all three of these types of solitary practice. Each of us in the early stages of our solitary practices may want to learn by rote time-tested practices designed by others, but in the end each of us will need to avoid rote practices and creatively design for ourselves an elegant practice which we can wholeheartedly and willingly discipline ourselves to regularly do.

We who live in this super-busy industrial wonderworld often tell ourselves that there is not time in a 24-hour day for one hour of solitary exercise. But this is not true. Many of us spend an hour in physical exercise. Many of us spend an hour in mindless television watching or internet surfing. Some of us spend more than an hour a day on our favorite addictions. Some of us spend too many hours sleeping. Some of us spend too many hours working. So let us consider this: spending an hour in solitary exercise is an hour spent in protest against the super-busy and super-indulgent patterns of our era. Doing a competent solitary religious exercise is a revolutionary action.