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internal thoughts, hopes, and anxieties. Yet as varied and disorganized as this jumble is, its various parts do contain a common denominator: self-concern. It's as if we are living in a hall of mirrors, in which we see in every person, every bite of food, and every car in front of us a reflection of our own face. For in it we mainly see our own welfare or our own danger. In this hall of mirrors, we are not really present to anyone else; even less are we present to God. In the scramble for survival, He is often the very last thing on our mind.

During this year, my aim in meditation has been, for a focused time each day, to reverse this condition which permeates the rest of my day. Inspired by a number of places in the Course, I have been using meditation as a way to step out of that hall of mirrors and make myself as present to God as I possibly can. I have been finding this so rewarding that I wanted to share the Course passages that have inspired it and what they have told me about meditation.

“Here I am, Lord”

In the two days before the Course started coming through, Helen Schucman was hearing Jesus' voice and writing down what she heard. During this time, Jesus gave Bill Thetford what was essentially a meditation technique:

He has to learn better concentration. His mind flits about too much for good communication [for Bill to receive communication from God]. Suggest a very short phrase like “Here I am Lord” and [now speaking to Bill] don't think of *anything* else. Just pull in your mind slowly from everywhere else and center it on these words. (*Absence from Felicity*, p. 197)

Jesus is clearly instructing Bill in meditation. He tells Bill to pull in his attention from everything else (i.e., the normal worldly stimuli), center it on a single short phrase, and then keep it there (“don't think of anything else”). This certainly sounds like meditation to me.

What I find particularly interesting about this is the phrase itself: “Here I am, Lord.” To see what I mean, please take a moment, close your eyes, and say this phrase a few times. Go ahead and do that now, if you will.

What I find is that this phrase quickly gives me a sense of God being near, right in front of me. Did it do that with you? If it did, there's no mystery *why* it did. If you were to walk into a room and say to John, “Here I am, John,” you would

A BETTER WAY

The Practice of Being Present to God

by Robert Perry

We tend to think of meditation as turning inward, clearing away the distractions, and being fully present to something within our own mind. In a sense, then, we view meditation as an act of being present to ourselves. While many of the Course's meditations fit right into this model, many of them offer another perspective. They frame meditation as an act of being present to Someone Else, namely God. They portray it as an attempt at total encounter, as an essentially relational act, in which we lift our mind out of its self-absorbed bubble and bring it into the Presence of God. In this article, I want to explore the idea of meditation as the practice of being totally present to God.

Usually, of course, our mind is not particularly present to God. Rather, it is present to an ever-changing jumble of external objects and activities, as well as

really be saying, “I am presenting myself to you. I am available to you. I am present to you.” To say, “Here I am, Lord” is to say the same to God. Jesus made this clear to Bill in later guidance:

When I told Bill to concentrate on the phrase “Here I am, Lord,” I did not mean “in this world” by “here.” I wanted him to think of himself as a separate consciousness, capable of direct communication with the Creator of that consciousness. (*Absence from Felicity*, p. 285)

In other words, “Here I am, Lord” did not mean “Here I am, down here in this world.” It meant, “I am present to You, in contact with You, in communication with You.” In this, we can really see the relational intent of this exercise. The intended effect was for Bill to know himself as a consciousness that could experience “direct communication with the Creator of that consciousness.” It was for Bill to know himself not as an ephemeral puff of smoke, floating in the darkness far from God, but as one who lived in the light of direct communication with God.

Notice how Jesus’ meditation instructions are designed to heighten this effect. To “pull in your mind slowly from everywhere else and center it on these words” is to make yourself completely present to those words—the words by which you are making yourself present to God. Jesus, in other words, wanted Bill to make himself totally present to the act of making himself totally present to God.

Calling on God’s Name

We find this same basic approach to meditation in Lesson 183, “I call upon God’s Name and on my own.” There, we are given a meditation technique in which we remove our attention from dwelling on all the “little names” of the world and place it instead on repeating God’s Name. There are, however, two very different ways of repeating God’s Name, and this applies to any of the words we may choose for that Name (God, Father, Love, etc.). One is a third-person way, in which repeating God’s Name amounts to saying “Him.” Here, we are simply referring to a Being Who exists somewhere. The other is a second-person way, in which repeating His Name amounts to saying “You.” Here, we are directly addressing God Himself. Which way does this lesson advocate? The answer is revealed in this passage:

Thus [by repeating His Name] do we give an invitation which can never be refused. And God will come, and answer it Himself. (W-pI.183.7:1-2)

So, by repeating God’s Name, we are really giving Him an *invitation*, an invitation to *come to us*. And we can trust that this invitation will not go unanswered. “And God will come, and answer it Himself.” Saying His Name, then (as the very next sentence implies), is a way to “call on Him.” This is clearly the second-person way of repeating God’s Name, and it is miles away from the third-person way. To see what I mean, you might want to try them both. Try repeating the word “God” in each of the two ways described in the two sets of parentheses below:

Third person: “God” (that Being Who created all things)

Second person: “God” (I am calling Your Name. I am inviting You to come to me.)

There really is a world of difference between the two, isn’t there? The second one is so much more direct. Indeed, it has a very similar spirit to “Here I am, Lord.” To say, “God, I am calling You to come to me” is very similar to saying, “Lord, I am presenting myself to You.” Both are just different forms of being present to God. You really can’t sincerely say, “God come to me; I am calling on You,” without being present to God.

In Lesson 183, just as with “Here I am, Lord,” Jesus asks us to pull our mind in from everywhere else and center it on the one thing he is giving us to repeat:

Practice but this today; repeat God’s Name slowly again and still again. Become oblivious to every name but His [a reference to the “little names” of worldly things]. Hear nothing else. Let all your thoughts become anchored on This. (W-pI.183.6:1-4)

This is uncannily similar to “[Use] a very short phrase like ‘Here I am Lord’ and don’t think of *anything* else.” In both, clearing out all extraneous thoughts has the effect of making us fully present to the act of making ourselves fully present to God.

Finally, there is an additional way in which this lesson intensifies the act of being present to God. It adds the element of *desire*:

And then God’s Name becomes our only thought, our only word, the only thing that occupies our minds, the only wish we have, the only sound with any meaning, and the only Name of everything that we desire to see;

of everything that we would call our own. (W-pI.183.6:6)

To the extent that something is the object of our desire, to that same extent we become present to it. Imagine saying to God the following things, based on the above quotation:

You are the only wish I have.
Your Name is the only sound with any meaning to me.
You are everything that I desire to see.
You are everything that I would call my own.

Or, to use the words of the prayer for Lesson 287:

You are my goal, my Father.
What but You could I desire to have?
What way but that which leads to You could I desire to walk? (W-pII.287.2:1-3)

If you really meant those things, how could they not make you one hundred percent present to God? This is true of another attitude this lesson implies that we should hold: trust. Remember how it said of our invitation, “And God will come, and answer it Himself”? Trusting that the invitation will be answered has a similar effect to filling the invitation with desire. It allows us to release all of our energies into the invitation. If you know that the person invited will come, you can really pour your heart into the invitation. Can you do the same with an invitation that you expect will be ignored?

Here, then, in Lesson 183, we have another take on the act of being fully present to God. We take a single word and use it to address God directly, to call Him to us. We withdraw our attention from all the world’s “little names” and focus it only on this one Name. We fill our invitation with desire and with trust that it will be answered. And we stay with this process, repeating our trusting, desire-filled invitation over and over, to the exclusion of all else, entering deeper and deeper into this relational act. All of these aspects amount to making ourselves completely present to God.

Empty hands, open hearts, open minds

I have also noticed that there are a number of passages in which we say to God, “I come to You.” Here are four of the nine times that the Course puts this statement on our lips:

Father, I come to You. And You will come to me who ask. I am the Son You love. (W-pI.168.6:7-9)

Father, I come to You today to seek the peace that You alone can give. I come in silence.
(W-pII.221.1:1-2)

Today I come to You. I will step back and merely follow You. (W-pII.233.1:5-6)

*In deepest silence I would come to You, to hear Your Voice and to receive Your Word. I have no prayer but this:
I come to You to ask You for the truth.* (W-pII.254.1:2-3)

To say, “I come to You” is such a direct and personal thing. It’s the sort of thing you could imagine saying to a lover from whom you have been separated, right before a joyous reunion. Also, if you think about it, “I come to You” is not so different from “Here I am, Lord.” Both are saying, “God, I am closing the gap between us. I am placing myself in Your Presence.” Indeed, the two statements go together so well that we could imagine *saying* them together: “I come to You. Here I am, Lord.”

What also struck me is *how* we are supposed to come to God. Notice these lines in the above examples: “I come in silence.” “In deepest silence I would come.” “I will step back.” They all imply the same thing: I would empty myself so that I can be filled with God. There are some particularly beautiful examples of this sentiment in the Workbook. The prayer for Lesson 306 has us saying this to God:

In gratitude and thankfulness we come, with empty hands and open hearts and minds, asking but what You give. (W-pII.306.2:2)

A great deal is packed into this brief line. We come to God filled with gratitude for the gifts that we have received and will receive. We come with empty hands, open to receive. We come with open hearts, ready to let God all the way in. We come with open minds, not filled with a worldview that shuts Him out. And we empty ourselves because we want

to receive *only* what He gives. We are tired of our own gifts, tired of listening to our own voice. Now we want God. Interestingly, we find the exact same trio of open hands, hearts, and minds in Lesson 110:

Today we make a great advance to truth by letting idols go, and opening our hands and hearts and minds to God today. (W-pI.110.10:4)

Notice that the same dynamic is going on. We open our hands and hearts and minds so that we have room to receive God.

After noticing that this trio of opening hands, hearts, and minds to God occurs twice (and it occurs again in rough form in Lesson 140, paragraph 12), I decided to incorporate it into my meditations. I would repeat “Father” and have a sense of coming to God with empty hands. To me, this meant empty of all the things that I am grasping, carrying, and doing. Then I would repeat “Father” and have a sense of opening my heart to God. To let someone into your heart, of course, means to make that person an important part of what you love and even what you are. Then I would repeat “Father” and have a sense of opening my mind to God. To me, this meant setting aside my normal view of things in which God is peripheral, and so making room for Him to fill my awareness.

To the extent I could do these things, I felt immensely more present to God than I normally would in a meditation. In fact, it was this practice that made me keenly aware of the Course’s emphasis on the practice of being present to God. If you come to someone with empty hands, open heart, and open mind, isn’t that the same as being fully present to him? Conversely, if you come to him with your hands lugging five bags of groceries, your heart closed, and your mind shut to everything that he represents, isn’t that the same as *not* being present to him?

After this, I noticed that you can find different parts of the hands/hearts/mind trio in other places in the Course. For instance, there are meditation instructions about coming to God with empty hands:

Forget this world, forget this course, and come with wholly empty hands unto your God. (W-pI.189.7:5)

Heaven itself is reached with empty hands and open minds, which come with nothing to find everything and claim it as their own. (W-pI.133.13:1)

There are meditation instructions about opening our minds to God:

Be very still and open your mind....We are trying to reach God. (W-pI.49.4:2, 8)

Open your mind to Him. Be still and rest. (W-pI.128.7:7-8)

And, in Helen Schucman’s final scribing, “The Gifts of God” (found in the back of her poetry collection by the same name), we find God imploring us to open our hearts to Him:

Come, My Son, open your heart, and let Me shine on you. (*The Gifts of God*, p. 128)

The principle here is obvious. If our hands are filled with the things of this world, if our heart is filled with guardedness, and if our mind is clogged with our own know-it-all thoughts, what room is there for God? But when we open our hands to God, we have room to receive everything. When we open our heart to Him, He can enter and take up residence in our heart of hearts. When we open our mind to Him, He can stream into our awareness and become the center of our worldview. Only when we come to Him in silence and emptiness are we present enough to *Him* to allow His Presence into *us*. As Lesson 189 says, “And in our quiet hearts and open minds, His Love will blaze its pathway of itself” (W-pI.189.9:4).

Conclusion

I would really encourage you to try out this approach to meditation. Of course, it need not become the only way you meditate. The Course itself contains other kinds of meditation; for instance, meditations aimed at experiencing your true Self. But if you want to experiment with this approach, just try the various specific techniques I’ve suggested here:

- Meditate on the phrase “Here I am, Lord” and, as Jesus told Bill, “don’t think of *anything* else. Just pull in your mind slowly from everywhere else and center it on these words.” For more on this, see my article “Here I am, Lord.”
- Try the Name of God meditation. Choose a name for God and repeat it over and over to the exclusion of all other thoughts. Repeat it as a call to God to come to you, a call filled with desire and trust, trust that He will come. For more help with this, see my article “Name of God Meditation.”

- Meditate on the phrase “I come to You,” using the same instructions as those for “Here I am, Lord.”
- Combine any of the above with a sense of opening your hands and heart and mind to God. For instance, repeat “Here I am, Lord” and imagine your hands being empty, open to receive. Then repeat it again and feel your heart being open to God. Then repeat it again while opening your mind to the experience of God. By the way, it’s probably best to do the hands/heart/mind thing only towards the beginning of your meditation. Once that has cleared your mind and focused it on God, I find it best to let go of thinking about hands/heart/mind and focus just on being present to God via whatever word or words I am repeating. It makes for a simpler, more focused meditation.
- You may also want to try what I call Open Mind Meditation, in which being present to God takes the form of being completely empty of words, thoughts, and beliefs, and being filled with a wordless expectancy that God is about to dawn on your mind. For more on this, see my article “Open Mind Meditation: The Practice of the Final Step.”
- Once you get the basic idea, feel free to experiment with your own forms. The common denominator is that few (or no) words are used, distracting thoughts are cleared from the mind, and your entire focus is on making yourself present to God.

When using any of the above methods, make sure you keep foremost in your mind the goal of being present to God. The whole point is to leave your normal sense of being present only to your own self-absorbed hall of mirrors, and enter into a stable, alert sense of being totally present to God. And since the ego is the mother of self-absorption, to do this is to step outside the ego. Of course, distracting thoughts will regularly enter in, and so, as the Workbook often instructs, you will need to be ready to use words to draw your mind back to your focus.

To make this approach to meditation work, you will obviously need to *want* to be present to God. This may mean working on your sense of God as loving rather than remote or judgmental. One of the best things I have found to move one’s sense of God in this direction are the prayers in Part II of the Workbook. You may therefore want to pick one of these prayers, such as the one for Lesson 232 or 264, and spend five or ten minutes praying it as an introduction to your meditation time.

At the heart of this whole approach is a very simple notion: God is always fully present to us; we have simply made ourselves absent to Him. But having done that, we can undo it. The Course is clear that God is always with us, around us, in us. Every heartbeat of ours is a call to Him, and He hears and answers every one (see W-pII.267.1:7). He is always, without exception, totally present to us. The reason we do not experience ourselves as constantly bathed in His Presence is that we have made ourselves absent to Him. We are so deeply and habitually distracted from Him that it seems that He is literally not here, that He has left us. We are like someone who is so lost in the gloom of his own drama that he does not see the sunlight shining all around him.

Therefore, in this kind of meditation, we are not approaching a God Who has been off somewhere else. We are not coming objectively nearer to God. And we certainly are not making the first risky move in a courtship process. We are simply reciprocating the move that God has already made. We are simply turning in the direction of a Presence that has never left us, that is always here, holding out His Hand in welcome. Are we willing to step outside our ego’s lonely hall of mirrors, take this Hand, and be lifted into this eternal encounter?



E-mail your comments to the author at: robert@circleofa.org

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CIRCLE MAILBOX

I think that [Greg's] article "The Joy of Realizing That This Place Is Hell" [*A Better Way* #70) is excellent. I really enjoyed reading it and it inspired me. I realize that I often forget or just ignore (regrettably) not only the hell I have gone through but the hell others have been through and are still in. I hope to help others (who are "in hell") in a significant way and someday master *A Course in Miracles*.

— Greg Smith

• • •

"The Joy of Realizing That This Place Is Hell" is simply awesome. Many, many thanks Greg!

— Kurt McCurdy