

THE 'I AM' PRESENT

A man went for a walk and met a person known in India as *saniasi*. These are holy persons, sometimes itinerant but often living in forests. They believe that the whole world is their home, the sky their roof, and that God will provide for them.

When the man met the *saniasi*, he said, "I find this hard to believe. Last night in a dream, God said to me, 'Tomorrow you will meet a *saniasi*, and he will give you a precious stone, and you will become a rich man.'"

The *saniasi* said, "Well, let me look here in my sack and see if I can find a stone like that." He rummaged for a few moments and then said, "Perhaps this will do."

The man could not believe his eyes. It was the largest diamond he had ever seen or even heard about.

The *saniasi* said, "I found this in the forest. You are welcome to it." He gave it to the man and then walked away.

The man took the diamond home, filled with excitement. He sat at home with the precious stone all day enjoying it and thinking... and thinking. When evening came, he left his house, walked into the woods and found the *saniasi*. He returned the diamond and said, "Instead of this, I want something else from you that will make me even richer."

The *saniasi* asked, "What is it?"

The man replied, "I want you to give me the treasure that makes it possible for you to give away this diamond."

Psychological research tells us that most of our conscious thoughts are thoughts of the past. We replay old scenes in our minds; we fight old battles; we nurse old grievances; we recall past joys. We expend a great deal of energy dwelling in the past. Psychological research also tells us that the second most common type of thought we have is of the future. We fill our minds with hopes, fears, fantasies and anxieties about the future. We have an idealized vision of how we want our future to be, but even that idealized vision, that personal dream, is compromised by ever-present and nagging fear. There is a saying: "I am an old person with many cares, most of which have never come true." Jesus (Yeshuah) himself cautions us about this when he says: "Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for the day is its own evil." (Mt. 6:34).

Like the shadows of the past, our visions of the future are not real. Neither has substance, yet both consume much of our energy and attention. The past is gone, and the future has

not yet arrived. All we have is the present – this present moment. It is only in the present that all reality fully exists; yet we are rarely present to it. There is a perversity in us which continually wants to draw us away from this present moment, away from this present place.

The Desert Fathers were well acquainted with this. It was classically described by Evagrius Ponticus (345 – 399) in the fourth century:

The morning is wearing on, getting hotter and stickier. There is still a long time to go before eating or any other break in the routine. Hours spent plaiting reeds for making baskets have left you numb and bored. Is there any progress at all to be seen? Surely progress would be more possible elsewhere, doing something else. And, after all, this (contemplative life) must surely be a selfish life; surely, there is one of the brothers who needs a visit, who needs something. And would I not be more useful in the city anyway? That is where the real need is, and I could be much more effective there. Anywhere but here, any time but now.

You do not have to be a hermit to appreciate this. Anyone who lives with a routine, as most of us do, will recognize the symptoms instantly. The ego founders, whines, pleads, maneuvers. During contemplation, it does not want to stay motionless, does not want to be silent. St Benedict (480 – 547), too, knew about this and wrote somewhat acidly about “gyrovagues,” wandering monks without fixed residence or leadership, who were constantly on the road living off the hospitality of others and always thinking that the grass was greener in some other monastic community. It is the same with us on our chair or bench or cushion. We sit down and almost immediately we want to move or to take our mind away from the present moment. What are we doing here? When is the bell going to ring? It is the same for us in daily life.

The reality is that there *is* no place to go. There *is* nothing else to do. This present moment really is the only moment. Your present place really is the only place. Another Desert Father, Abba Arsenius (360 – 450), whose feast day we celebrated recently (18 July), also addressed the importance of silence and remaining in the present moment when he said: “The one who dwells in silent repose will be able to see God in a pure manner.” And again: “The purity of heart which sees God, and to which Our Lord ascribes blessing, cannot be acquired without dwelling in solitary and silent contemplation.” This is our practice. This is the treasure which the seeker requested from the *saniasi*.

The Irish poet, David Whyte (1955 -) writes in one of his poems on meditation:

Imagine my surprise,
sitting... in silent and
irremediable
fear of the world,
to find the body

forgetting
its own fear the instant
it opened and placed
those unassuming hands
one upon the other,
and the world for one
hour
closed its terrifying eyes
in gratitude,
saying,
“This is my body. I am found.”

The contemplative life grounds us in the body, settles us there, and moves our consciousness out of the shadows of a gray and ephemeral existence, which is the past and the future, into the solid reality of the present. The contemplative life lives in the present moment. This is not easy, and we are rarely successful for long. The mind all too easily slips into the past or races ahead to the future. We most often find our fears, our old pains, our regrets, our plans and our fantasies, more comfortable and attractive than the wonders of the present moment. In escaping into past or future, the mind seeks to escape from itself, to escape from what is true and real, to escape from the consciousness of what is “just so”. An important part of the practice is bringing the attention back again and again to the posture, the breath and this present moment. As the mind learns more and more to dwell in the present, it moves out of the shadow of illusion and delusion and begins to face itself and to be with God. This can be painful and uncomfortable at first. Brother Lawrence (1614 – 1691) acknowledged as much when he said that “remaining in the presence of God can be painful in the beginning.”

Yet, the more we live in the present moment, the more and more easily we can relinquish fears and old hurts. It is only by dwelling in the present moment that we are liberated from their tyranny. That Ultimate Reality we call God only dwells in the present. God is not in “heaven,” if by “heaven” one means some distant place in the future. God is the Self-defined I AM present and is eternally present to each of us in *just this moment*.

God is the timeless I AM (Ex 3:14) present, beyond all categories of being and non-being, beyond all categories of time and change. God lives in the eternal present, a point of no dimension. God is present in an infinite, changeless, dynamic present which is constantly unfolding, yet constantly remaining the same. The more our minds abide in the present moment, the more we are present to God, to others and to ourselves. We are most truly alive when we are living in the present moment with and in God.

Contemplatives need go nowhere to find God. Martin Buber (1878 – 1965) once said: “There is no such thing as searching for God, because there is nothing in which God cannot be found.” The more we are present to the present moment, the more alive we are in God’s presence. And the more we live in God, the more we enter into God’s timelessness.

In the second letter of Peter, we read: “With the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day.” (2 Pt 3:8) And Meister Eckhart (1260 – 1328) said: “The Now in which God created the world and the Now in which the last person will disappear and the Now in which I am speaking to you, all are the same in God, and there is only one Now.” With these words, Meister Eckhart shows us God’s supremely glorious nature whereby God is fully transcendent and completely immanent, entirely beyond all and yet completely within all as the One who alone IS, the groundless Ground or Essence of all, the transpersonal “God beyond god” and the personal Lord, the Triune God of Father, Son and Sacred Spirit in non-dual nature.

The blessed live in God. They have realized and experienced their true nature as no other than sharing in God’s life. They have realized from direct experience that there is, in fact; no other – no separation. The joy of heaven is the joy of being alive in God’s life in this present moment, living increasingly in a timeless present. The blessed relinquish – empty themselves of – any idea of a separate self-identity and become enfolded in the mystery of God manifesting at every moment in ordinary everyday life. In each new moment, the blessed rise with the Risen Christ and ascend – that is, return – to union with the Father. No longer victims of the past or entranced by the future, the blessed live fully in the present and in God. They have stepped away from the shadows and become real. They have become themselves the treasure of the *saniasi*.