Reflections on Sleep: Inspired by James Finley – Led by Hazel 28st October 2020

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer providing video resources every week but may continue to create these important seasons of the year. We have included some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation.

If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in the physical space of the meditation room at Wisdom Centre. The tradition we meditate in is Centering Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction: In one of our meditation videos near the beginning of lockdown this year, we reflected on the value of finding healthy daily rhythms during a time of trauma. Such rhythms can bring a sense of stability when we attune to a deeper source within us that connects our internal body clock with the rhythms of the world around us. During this time of crisis, many people have found difficulty maintaining a healthy sleep/wake rhythm. This might stem from anxiety, lack of social contact, loss of loved ones, or major changes in normal life patterns, such as overstimulation or under stimulation through life's demands.

Our sense of time and of night and day is perhaps more in our awareness this week in the UK, as our rhythm has needed to change in response to 'the clocks going back' to Greenwich Mean Time. It may be easy to wind back the hands of the clock, or reset our digital devices, but our bodies need to take time to adjust.

Nature's rhythms: We can learn so much through watching the natural world. Other animals and plants have no wrist watches or wall clocks, but they are very responsive to diurnal rhythms and rhythms of tides, moons, seasons and years. For example, tigers are very energy efficient and are in a state of sleep or rest for around 18-20 hours a day. When stalking their pray, they might be equally still at times, but are highly wakeful and alert. The lotus flower, a symbol of mediation, has a rhythm of opening during the day and closing at night.




I am very aware that I cannot control my capacity to be awake or asleep by looking at a clock. I can only do my best to create the conditions under which either sleep or wakefulness might occur. I have recently felt curious about how our meditation practice might help us be more aware and accepting of sleep and awake

states and rhythms, even when they are not the patterns we might choose. There have been times when, in a nice warm room, at a meditation group in the evening, after a meal, with a soothing voice leading, I have found myself dozing off. At other times, especially when feeling anxious, it can be hard to get to sleep at night. This is a big topic, and others will have their own valuable insights which would be interesting to hear. Today I will share just a few readings that I have found helpful. We might pause periodically to notice anything that arises within ourselves.





In the Christian Gospels, we read of times when Jesus was asleep when others around him were anxious and awake, and other times when he was awake and others were asleep and could not stay awake when asked to. For example, in Mark (3:37-39) we read of Jesus sleeping during a rather traumatic boat ride:

> *A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.*

And in Mathew (26:39-40) in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus disciples struggled to stay awake having been asked to look out for Jesus whilst he prayed:

> *He fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."*

In learning about meditation, we are usually guided to be 'alert' or 'awake' to the experience of the present moment. For example, mystic and psychotherapist James Finley[(1)] draws upon his learning from Christian and other traditions, in suggesting we might practice being 'present, open and awake, neither clinging to nor rejecting anything'. In this simple childlike intention of being present, and being still, he guides us to observe whatever is in our awareness, thoughts, meanings, thoughts about thoughts, intuitions, body sensations or movements, emotions, sounds inside us or outside of us, images and so on. It is the energy of kindly attentiveness itself that engages us. However, sometimes our body is tired and needs sleep; as we notice our sensations of sleepiness, or jolting back to wakefulness, we might also notice how we treat ourselves when that happens and allow ourselves to not cling to or reject that in just the same way.

Wakefulness: It seems that in our practice, we are continually falling asleep when we drift into 'being' a thought or sensation, losing our observational eye of awareness. This might be one step away from drifting off into daydreaming or sleepiness, symbolically the closing of the lotus flower perhaps. Finley describes how the learning is in the perpetual willingness to continually come back again and again and again, with compassion, to the observing point which *is* present and awake. He writes 'Just sit this way, with all your heart, knowing and trusting that by way of this compassionate presence the great way is being perfectly manifested. Do not run away, but instead continue sitting, allowing yourself to be humbled in the crumbling away of any hope of attainment founded upon your own powers. Just keep sitting in the growing awareness of your powerlessness, until your powerlessness unexpectedly opens out onto a starkly beautiful wilderness that is not even on the map the ego-self has been using in its seemingly hopeless expedition into the ineffable.' Brother David Steind-Rast writes: 'May you grow still enough to hear the small noises earth makes in preparing for the long sleep of winter, so that you yourself may grow calm and grounded deep within.'

Needing sleep: Some of our group have been listening to a series of podcasts by James Finley[(2)] over the past few months, called 'Turning to the Mystics'. In one episode that dealt with listeners' questions, someone asked how our practice might help us with our sleep during the covid crisis. James Finley described his own relationship with sleeplessness, drawing also upon his experience as a psychotherapist:

He suggested we might think back to what our previous normal pattern was, because for some people a disturbance of sleep is an ongoing issue. Anxiety about the pandemic or other major concerns, may have exacerbated an existing problem. He recommended continuing to be faithful to whatever practices have been helpful in the past, eg a cup of chamomile tea, or warm shower, etc.

If you wake in the middle of the night and find yourself thinking about frightening media images or stories, Finley advises listeners to acknowledge how natural and normal it is to have feelings of anxiety or depression in the face of overwhelming suffering. From a spiritual perspective, he says, "What we're trying to do is to recognize the ways in which the intensities of these concerns is cutting off experiential access to the presence of God sustaining us in the midst of these concerns, which is always there breath-by-breath, heartbeat-by-heartbeat."

Meditation practice through breath awareness or other routes can open access to the "deeper place that helps to reinstate us in this groundedness of God sustaining us, being there for and with us. … And then we hand our troubled heart over into the care of God, sustaining us in the midst of our troubles and our fears so that our peace learns to reside in this loving presence of God that sustains us in the midst of this, and in a peace that's not dependent on the outcome of the effort, whether it be our death, anyone's death, the death of the world, because it's a peace that isn't dependent on anything at all. It's a peace that transcends conditions, permeates conditions, sustains us in conditions."

Also, we are in this together, "united in our collective preciousness in the love of God, and in our collective fragility in the love of God; and, therefore, we all belong to each other, and we're all woven to each other. And so, our concern is a little piece of fear in the burden that we carry, this little echo of the charism that burns all over the world, and by freely choosing to participate in that and hand that over to God, that can also help as a form of empathic communion with the collective preciousness of ourself to Source."

Finley shares that he is up at night a lot and always has been, and finds spiritual things help ground him; for example, putting on a spiritual talk on a timer (with headphones), and walking around or just lying, listening.

"But something that helps me as I walk around in the dark, I realize that God is present in the darkness in which I'm walking around and around in the living room. And I also know that God is not just present in the dark, but God is somehow the reality of the darkness itself. And what I do is I talk to the dark; and knowing that as I talk to the dark, God hears me in the dark in ways that I cannot and do not need to understand. So, somehow by befriending the dark, recognizing God's presence in the dark, I realize that darkness is a kind of a sovereign, quiet, trustworthy darkness that is actually permeating the darkness of our fears. And I think that's the key - how to breathe in that sense of the sovereignty of the divinity of the darkness and then to permeate the fear; so they form kind of an alchemy, and it softens the edges of the fear, and that helps me to do that."



So it seems that bringing awareness to both wakefulness and sleepiness, leads us to Presence itself – the divine encounter.

Before we move into our meditation, I will read a blessing by John O'Donohue.

A poem before meditation: **'Vespers'** by John O'Donohue

As light departs to let the earth be one with night,
Silence deepens in the mind, and thoughts grow slow;
The basket of twilight brims over with colours
Gathered from within the sacred meadows of the day
And offered like blessings to the gathering tenebrae.

After the day's frenzy, may the heart grow still,
Gracious in thought for all the day brought,
Surprises that dawn could never have dreamed:
The blue silence that came to still the mind,
The quiver of mystery at the edge of a glimpse,
The golden echoes of worlds behind voices.

Tense faces unable to hide what gripped the heart,
The abrupt cut of a glance or a word that hurt,
The flame of longing that distance darkened,
Bouquets of memory gathered on the heart's altar,
The thorns of absence in the rose of dream.

And the whole while the unknown underworld
Of the mind, turning slowly, in its secret orbit.

May the blessing of sleep bring refreshment and release
And the Angel of the moon call the rivers of dream
To soften the hardened earth of the outside life,
Disentangle from the trapped nets the hurts and sorrow,
And awaken the young soul for the new tomorrow.

Beginning Meditation: Before beginning our meditation, you may wish to adjust your posture, paying particular attention to the energy in your body and the rhythm of your breath, taking a calming deep breath in through your nose, and a slow breath out, letting go fully. Then repeat this a few times. If you have a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, and perhaps how your word is in time with the breath.

Bell Sounds…25-minute meditations begins…Count down timer starts (this may be your own watch or meditation timer app)

Bell Sounds…Meditation ends

Post Meditation Blessing: **'Before Sleep'** by John O'Donohue

As I lay down to sleep,
May the guardian angel
Watch over me,
Coaxing all my cares
To unravel into peace.

As darkness within
Is wed to darkness without
Freed from the weight of light,
Let my eyes sleep,
Relieved of all intensities.

Let my imagination
Trawl the compressed seas
To bless the dawn
With a generous catch
Of luminous dream.

May this new night of rest
Repair the wear of time
And restore youth of heart
For the adventure
That awaits tomorrow.



Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon.

Resources: Pictures from Pixabay.com
(1) 'The Contemplative Heart' by James Finley (Sorin Books, 2000), pp 51-129.
(2) 'Turning to the Mysics' podcast by James Finley and Kirsten Oates (Centre for Action and Contemlatino) https://cac.org/podcasts/questions-about-the-practice/
(3) Tara Brach Meditation on Sleep: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfxTy5v7yIA&feature=youtu.be



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.