Reflection on Slowing Down from Rob, our leader this week

This week, we just have a transcript. We have attached some pictures, chosen by Rob.
At 7.30pm on Wednesday some of us will be meditating 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 in the Centering Prayer tradition, 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: As we move into Autumn, we notice nature beginning to slow down and to prepare for hibernation and the stillness of Winter. All the activity of ripening and shedding of fruits and berries, and the flurry of animals and birds to ensure they have enough nourishment and resources to face the period of cold and dearth is winding down. It may be a bit different for ourselves, particularly this year, when after an enforced time of reduced activity we may be keen to rush back to the harness of work to rescue our own finances and save the public economy.

There is a tendency, particularly in the West, for there to be a reliance on goal-orientated busy-ness and the positive experiences of calm during lockdown may not have been long enough to curb it. At a time of great activity when his monastery was being taken to Court and ever more long and complicated documents were arriving each day in the fax machine, one of my teachers said "When there is much to do, it is important to do very little!" It sounded at first a contradiction, but what he meant was that we should resist the temptation to get everything done frantically and to reflect what is most important and do just a little at a time, giving it the time it needs.

The Bisy Backson

In the Tao of Pooh, Benjamin Hoff describes what he calls the "Bisy Backson".

"Rabbit hurried on by the edge of the Hundred Acre Wood, feeling more important every minute, and soon he came to the tree where Christopher Robin lived. He knocked at the door, and he called out once or twice, and then he walked back a little way and put his paw out to keep the sun out, and called to the top of the tree, and then he turned all round and shouted "Hello!" and "I say!" "It's Rabbit!" – but nothing happened. Then he stopped and listened, and everything stopped and listened with him, and the Forest was very lone and still and peaceful in the sunshine, until suddenly a hundred miles above him a lark began to sing. "Bother!" said Rabbit. "He's gone out." He went back to the green front door, just to make sure, and he was turning away, feeling that his morning had got all spoilt, when he saw a piece of paper on the ground. And there was a pin in it, as if it had fallen off the door.
"Ha!" said Rabbit, feeling quite happy again. "Another notice!" This is what it said:

GON OUT

BACKSON
BISY
BACKSON CR”

Hoff comments “Rabbit didn’t know what a Backson was – in spite of the fact that he is one – so he went to ask Wol, the Owl. Wol didn’t know either. But we think we know, and we think a lot of other people do, too. Chiang-tse described one quite accurately:

‘There was a man who disliked seeing his foot-prints and his shadow. He decided to escape from them, and began to run. But as he ran along, more foot-prints appeared, while his shadow kept up with him. Thinking he was going too slowly, he ran faster and faster without stopping, until he finally collapsed from exhaustion and died. If he had stood still, there would have been no foot-prints. If he had rested in the shade, his shadow would have disappeared.’

“You see them almost everywhere you go, it seems. On practically any sunny day, you can see the Backsons stampeding through the park, making all kinds of loud Breathing Noises. Perhaps you are enjoying a picnic on the grass when you suddenly look up to find that one or two of them just ran over your lunch.

“Generally, though, you are safe around trees and grass, as Backsons tend to avoid them. They prefer instead to struggle along on asphalt and concrete, in imitation of the short-lived transportation machines for which those hard surfaces were designed. Inhaling poisonous fumes from the vehicles that that swerve to avoid them, the Backsons blabber away to each other about how much better they feel now that they have gone Outdoors. Natural living, they call it.

“Let’s put it this way: if you want to be healthy, relaxed and contented, just watch what a Bisy Backson does and then do the opposite. There’s one now, pacing back and forth, jingling the loose coins in his pocket, nervously glancing at his watch. He makes you feel tired just looking at him. The chronic Backson always seems to have to be going somewhere, at least on a superficial, physical level. He doesn’t go out for a walk though, he doesn’t have time.”

Abbot Arsenius: Slowing down does not, however, necessarily mean not going fast. There are some tasks which need to be done quickly. We sometimes need to hurry to meet a deadline or to avoid inconveniencing someone or causing a delay. Slowing down is more an attitude of mind; doing just a little means reflecting and evaluating what is really necessary, acting mindfully and giving each task the time which it actually needs. The man described by Chiang-tse who tried to escape his footsteps and his shadow, was deluded by fear and was not able to do a reality check. Sometimes we just get carried away by a task and cannot stop even though we are not actually achieving anything, and sometimes we cannot stop because we cannot find a way to bring the task to an end or are too proud to do what is needed.

Those scenarios are described by Abbot Christopher Jamison in his book ‘Finding Sanctuary’ in an episode in the life of Abbot Arsenius, one of the desert fathers.

“One day in his cell he heard a voice calling to him: ‘Come and I will show you the works of men.’ He followed the voice and it led him to a place where an Ethiopian was cutting wood and making a great pile. He struggled to carry the pile, but in vain. Instead of taking some off, however, he cut more wood, which he added to the pile. Then once again he tried to carry it and once again he failed. He kept this up for a long time. Then the voice led Arsenius on further, to where a man was drawing water from a lake and putting it into a broken container so that the water ran back into the lake. Going on further still, he saw two men on horseback carrying a beam between them, one beside the other. They were trying to enter the door of a temple, but the beam would not fit crosswise and neither would draw back to let the other go first so that the beam might go in lengthwise. The story concludes with the voice saying: ‘Let everyone be watchful of his actions lest he labour in vain.’ “

Father Jamison comments that "the tale is almost chilling in its relevance to us. We are piling high material wealth that we cannot carry and even when we succeed in carrying it, most disconcerting of all, our pride prevents us delivering it. The men on horseback are excluded from the temple; their pride prevents them entering the holy place where they might find rest. The fathers and mothers of the desert knew better than we do how being busy producing and consuming can be a substitute for facing the deeper realities of life."

Martha and Mary: The idea that we use our busy-ness as a distraction from facing the realities of life is illustrated by the story of Martha and Mary in St. Luke's Gospel. "While they were on their way Jesus came to a village where a woman named Martha made him welcome in her home. She had a sister, Mary, who seated herself at the Lord's feet and stayed there listening to his words. Now Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to get on with the work by myself? Tell her to come and lend me a hand.' But the Lord answered, 'Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things; but one thing is necessary. The part that Mary has chosen is best; and it shall not be taken away from her."

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"One thing is necessary!" The words reflect those of my teacher: "When there is much to do, it is important to do very little!" Slowing down is about being totally present and noticing how things really are – the deeper realities of life. It is about knowing what is really important and making the time to do it well and with a light heart, however quickly or slowly we need to get it done.

Beginning Meditation: So let us find and move into a comfortable position, relaxing the body, noticing its contact with the chair or cushion and with the floor. Letting go of the efforts, difficulties and worries of our day, and bringing ourselves into the peace of the present moment. Noticing our breathing as it slows and deepens. Giving attention to any points of tension or discomfort. If you use a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, perhaps co-ordinating it with the breathing, or simply focus on the candle or on the breathing, returning to the point of focus whenever you are aware of the mind wandering off, in a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance. Noticing where we are, the place and the time and the friends here with us and those we know are meditating with us remotely, and devoting ourselves just to this one period of formal practice. Recognising that this is our task at this time, just to sit still and to be awake and alive to each moment and to everything which arises in it. This is the one thing which is necessary. The meditation will last for 25 minutes and will begin and end with the sound of the bell.

Bell Sounds…25-minute meditations begins…Count down timer starts (or use your own watch or meditation timer app)
Bell Sounds…Meditation ends

Post Meditation Story: I would like to end with a story about the Taoist Master Chuang Tzu as interpreted by Thomas Merton. This is the same person as the one who told the story about the man running away from his footsteps and his shadow, but Chinese characters are difficult to transcribe accurately and Thomas Merton calls him Chuang Tzu.

The Turtle	As a plain turtle Dragging its tail in the mud?"
Chuang Tzu with his bamboo pole Was fishing in Pu river.	"For the turtle", said the Vice-Chancellor, "Better to live
The Prince of Chu Sent two-chancellors With a formal document:	And drag its tail in the mud!" "Go home!" said Chuang Tzu.

"We hereby appoint you Prime Minister." Chuang Tzu held his bamboo pole. Still watching Pu river, He said: "I am told there is a sacred tortoise, Offered and canonised Three thousand years ago, Venerated by the prince, Wrapped in silk, In a precious shrine On an altar In the Temple.	"Leave me here To drag my tail in the mud!" "What do you think: Is it better to give up one's life And leave a sacred shell As an object of cult In a cloud of incense Three thousand years, Or better to live

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.











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