Reflections on 'Identity' –3rd March 2021 – prepared by Rob

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 attached some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us', we meditate in our homes at 7.30 pm on Wednesday. The tradition we meditate in is Centring 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: Identity seems always to be in the news these days. It is portrayed as very virtuous to identify with this or that – a gender or a community or a nationality or whatever. Our 'identity' has to be 'presented' for all sorts of transactions and can even be stolen! Of course, we need to make distinctions of many kinds simply to function in everyday life; we need to recognise who is male and who female, respect preferences and acknowledge the boundaries between countries and districts and differences in race and culture. But all these are on a conventional basis, and the important thing is not to attach to any particular identity. That means not to believe it (identity), is who or what we really are.

In his 'Sermon on the mount', Jesus said: "Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?" (St Matthew 6:27). Nowadays, people imagine that they can transform themselves into whatever they wish by "taking thought", perhaps through surgery or other procedures. We are told that a person who accepts 100% that he is male rather than female or that she is female rather than male are being "binary" and that those identifying as not exclusively masculine or feminine are "non-binary". However, perhaps it is the other way round. A person who accepts how they have been born (however that is) is not attaching to or identifying particularly to what society believes they are. A person who is exploring, say, their gender, may not actually be "identifying" with an alternative gender but identifying too strongly with their original gender. Identification/attachment can lead to aversion and unhappiness as well as lack of belonging. So they are raising the distinction between the sexes to an unnecessarily important level and in so doing they are creating opposition and division – in other words they are the ones being "binary" or as it might be put in a spiritual context "dualist".

This is not to say that there is not and has not always been a small minority of people who actually suffer from gender or other dysmorphia, find their circumstances intolerable and need that to be addressed. What I am referring to is attachment – to pursuing a preference or an imagined ideal and identifying with it – believing that that is what we are.

The Lion's Roar: The attraction of 'identity' is that we all want to matter and to be something of value. We tend to add onto this desire, also the desire not to lose that identity but to continue being important, to survive and to last forever. In one of the few 'purple passages' in the Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha

compared his teaching of impermanence with the roar of a lion, which, when heard by the animals in the jungle, sent fear into their hearts.



'At Savatthi. "Bhikkhus, in the evening, the lion, the king of beasts, comes out from his lair. Having come out, he stretches himself, surveys the four quarters all around, and roars his lion's roar three times. Then he sets out in search of game.

"When the lion, the king of beasts, roars, whatever animals hear the sound are, for the most part, filled with fear, a sense of urgency and terror. Those that live in holes enter their holes; those who live in the water enter the water; those who live in the woods enter the woods, and the birds fly up into the air. Even those royal bull elephants, bound by strong thongs in the villages, towns and capital cities, burst and break their bonds asunder; frightened, they urinate and defecate and flee here and there. So powerful, bhikkhus, is the lion, the king of beasts, among the animals, so majestic and mighty."' (Samyutta Nikaya Book III, 76). The sutta goes on in verse:

"When the Buddha, through direct knowledge,
Sets in motion the Wheel of Dhamma,
The peerless Teacher in this world
With its devas makes this known:

The cessation of identity
And the origin of identity,
Also, The Noble Eightfold Path
That leads to suffering's appeasement,

Then those devas with long life spans,
Beautiful, ablaze with glory,
Are struck with fear, filled with terror,
Like beasts who hear the lion's roar.

'We've not transcended identity;
It seems, sir, we're impermanent.'
So they say having heard the utterance
Of the Arahant, the released Stable One."

We must not imagine that we escape because we are not "devas with long life spans, beautiful, ablaze with glory". The Buddha's message, like Jesus', is for all of us! We are not in a "safe space", are we?

Ground of Being and Consciousness: From a contemporary Christian perspective, Rev Don McGregor writes in 'Blue Sky God':

"The 'Ground of Being' is a term that has been used for many years as a description of the divine. The theologian Paul Tillich was the first to coin the phrase, and it was popularised by Bishop John Robinson in his controversial book 'Honest to God'. As individuals, we all think and feel as separate entities; we all seem to have our own separate Consciousness, our self-consciousness. This immediately gives us a problem in understanding the notion that Consciousness brings material reality into being. Surely, we each possess an individual consciousness – I am me, and you are you. The obvious question arises at a fundamental level: how can two separate 'consciousnesses' bring about material reality without conflict? If two individuals are simultaneously observing the same situation, there will surely be some difference in the way they perceive it or want it to be. There will be some conflict between their 'consciousnesses'? So what decides how the world will look? The answer to that from the physicists is that there are actually no individual, separate consciousnesses; there is only one Consciousness, of which we are all a part. There is only one vast field of Consciousness in which the universe exists, which holds it, and us, in being. Consciousness is all one.



Another analogy may help – a glass of water is put apart of the water present on the planet. It has been part of the oceans; it has been vapour in the air, clouds in the sky, rainfall to the ground, water in the streams and rivers. It is part of the water of the earth. It is only a glassful of water, contained and still, but of the same

essence as all the planet's water. Released from the glass, it will again become part of the ocean or the air or the clouds. It is all one water; there is no such thing as 'a water'. So it is with Consciousness – there is only one, as Amit Goswami ('Physics of the Soul') indicates:

"You and I have individual thoughts, feelings, dreams, etc., but we don't have Consciousness, let alone separate ones; we are Consciousness. And it is the same Consciousness for all of us…Consciousness is the ground of being; we cannot turn it off".

"This theory of downward causation, that all things stem from Consciousness, is still disputed amongst scientists, yet it is gaining ground as it gives explanations for all sorts of paranormal and psychological phenomena which have been observed and recorded, but which do not fit with the traditional notions of the material universe." An attempt to bring it to media attention was made in the 2005 film 'What the Bleep do we know', which has gained almost a cult following with its own website, newsletter and worldwide media attention, despite much criticism. Ervin Laslo, systems theorist and Nobel prize nominee, has written of his optimism for the future based on the idea that human Consciousness is evolving:

"Consciousness evolution is from the ego-bound to the transpersonal form. If this is so, it is a source of great hope. Transpersonal Consciousness is open to more of the information that reaches our brains than the Consciousness still dominant today. This could have momentous consequences. It could produce greater empathy among people, and greater sensitivity to animals, plants and the whole biosphere. It could create a subtle contact with the rest of the cosmos. When a critical mass of humans evolves to the transpersonal level of Consciousness, a higher civilisation is likely to emerge, with deeper solidarity and a higher sense of justice and responsibility."

"We can see the seeds of this higher level of transpersonal Consciousness in our world today. Globalisation has brought an awareness of the problems faced by humanity all around the world. Ecological issues facing the whole world have come to the forefront of the political agendas. No longer are we simply caught up in the problems of our own nation; many people today are still stuck in the tribal mentality that says, 'These are my people, this is my club, this is my country, we are in, and you are out'. Tribal mentality defines borders and barriers to say who is in and who is out. It is the root of all war. For thousands of years, wars have been fought because of tribal mentality, because we cannot find a way to live in harmony and peace with each other. The evolution of Consciousness to a transpersonal level is beginning to plant seeds of hope for a new way. We have gone global, and we know what it is like for people living in all sorts of places in the world. It opens our hearts and awareness to other people in places that we knew nothing about in previous generations. It paves the way for our 'tribe' to grow to be not just our town, not just our nation, not just our part of the world, but to embrace the whole world and work towards ways of achieving lasting peace, ways of bringing justice to the oppressed, and ways of making this world sustainable for the future. I believe that tribalism is slowly becoming globalism as we become more aware of our oneness in Consciousness – and that it is our hope for the future. Suppose human awareness can come from a compassionate centre that sees all humanity as one. In that case, the human race can move from tribal competitiveness to global co-operation and begin to live in harmony and peace with one another and all of creation. A dream it may be, but some dreams become reality – 'mind makes matter'."

Reflection: The idea that the world arises from Consciousness echoes John O'Donohue's reflections on dreams which Hazel quoted in last week's meditation: "If we take Nature as the great artist, then all presences in the world have emerged from her mind and imagination." It also echoes the Buddhist 12 link chain of dependent origination in which death leads to the absence of knowing, in which, however, there is still a vestigial awareness, sometimes called "re-birth consciousness" from which arise 'sankhara' – conditioned phenomena, i.e. the world. But this Consciousness, as Don McGregor explains, is not individual

but universal. It is not something which we can attach to or identify with but is the very ambience in which we have our being.

So, when we come to answer the questions on the census form, we do not need to say that we 'identify' with any gender! Nor do we need to identify with ancestors who may have been slave traders or racists and apologise on their behalves. Nor do we need to feel insulted if we see a statue of someone who ill-treated our ancestors or people of our race. We just need to understand that we are part of an evolving and changing universe which has no essential identity, to be kind to it and to ourselves, and to understand that we too change and come and go without being anything in particular. I say "just", but it is not that easy as both the lion's roar and Don McGregor's description of the possible course of evolution of consciousness show! We need to keep on working on it!

Preparation for Meditation: So let us now 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, triumphs 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 in the body. If you use a sacred word, you might notice its rhythm, perhaps co-ordinating it with the rhythm of the breathing. Or you may wish simply to focus on a candle or to follow the breath. Returning to our meditation object or point of focus whenever we are aware of the mind wandering off, in a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance. Accepting everything which arises, whether a sound, a thought, a feeling either pleasant or unpleasant or some other distraction; noticing it just as it is and letting it go without following or attaching to it. Knowing it as just a part of nature just as we are, and not something which we need to make our own or identify with. Returning with ease and joy to the meditation object.

We will meditate together for 25 minutes.

Post Meditation Reading: I would like to end with a Jewish Hasidic exchange quoted by Don McGregor.

"How do we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?" asked the Teacher.
"Is it when from a distance you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep?" suggested one of the students.
"No",,, was the answer.
"Is it when you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?" asked a second student.
"No." "Please tell us the answer then."
"It is," said the Teacher, "when you can look into the face of another human being, and you have enough light to recognise, in him or her, your brother or sister. Up until then, it is night, and darkness is still with us.

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. Stay safe and well.



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