Reflections on 'Self-emptying – an experiential exploration' –24th March 2021 – prepared by Hazel

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 7.30pm 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: As we pass the first day of spring, and reflect on the days ahead and the prospect of easing out of lockdown again, perhaps there is a present sense of sparsity in Lent and lockdown – a sense of being 'in the desert' for more than 40 days and nights? Might this experience have changed us in some way as we go forward? I notice within myself a sense of emptiness which may be about loss, but it also feels like a decluttering in some way, or at least a *need* to declutter internally (and perhaps externally). It drew me to explore experientially what inner emptiness feels like and how it arises. I am no student of theology, and others will be far more able to explain and express biblical perspectives such as kenosis and God's self-emptying in the Trinity(1). Neither do I feel qualified to give guidance on meditation practices in this respect, so I simply observe what I notice within myself in relation to self-emptying and offer some texts and references for your own experiential exploration should you wish to do so.

Experiential exploration: As in many areas of life, we can explore a phenomenon experientially, drawing upon a range of perspectives and senses, such as imagery, metaphor, body sensations and posture, relationship, emotions, meanings and resonances from connecting with the experiences of others, including through the scriptures and spiritual writings. For me, the image and sense of a vessel and its exterior and interior arose. I was drawn to refer back to Rob's meditations from June and September last year on 'Non-duality' and 'Letting go'(2). Self-emptying felt subtly different to letting go, more an opening to awareness of the space within and between, though very much still involving a letting go as Rob so vividly described. The cup that Rob spoke of in relation to non-duality also came to me and led me to focus on the imagery and metaphor of a vessel and its contents. I began to question: What is it that is emptying? What is the experience of emptiness? What leads to emptying? What is inside in the first place? What is the texture of the emptiness that replaces the fullness?

Self-emptying – noun, verb or adjective? When I googled 'self-emptying', I was surprised to meet with self-emptying dishwashers, self-emptying bins and self-emptying dehumidifiers, beehives and cat litter trays! No doubt all of these save relieved owners the effort of having to *do* the emptying because each item does it all by its 'self'. Is this true about self-emptying of the self? Do we have to 'do' it to our 'self' or is it a process that happens to us? James Finley(3) says in relation to moments of spiritual awakening, that we cannot make them

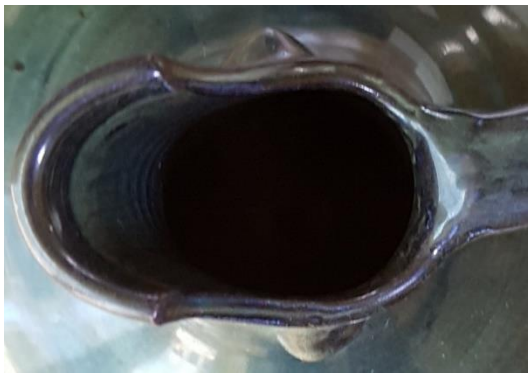
happen, but we can 'freely choose to assume the inner stance that offers the least resistance to the graced event of spiritual awakening.' He refers to the 'phenomenology of the artist, poet, lover, the healer in this process of freely choosing the stance of receptive openness to graced awakening.' He also says of meditation, that it is not a race between enlightenment and senility and which one will get there first; it is all about 'intention'. It is never any more than following our intention to practice. 'That is the path' he says: 'Mediation is not an activity that we do to ourselves, but rather, an open state of receptivity that we bring to every activity'.

Noticing the container and the contents: I was drawn to a pottery jug that for me seemed to denote emptying. The structure of the jug seemed to represent the 'egoic self' (as Richard Rohr[4]describes it - the sense of self as a human being in dualistic thinking experience), expressed physically in the container of the body. The inside seemed to represent the inner world from a more non-dualistic stance. Both container and content connected with the outer world. These photographs were taken in the evening in artificial light. The inside is dark and mysterious. It is not clear what it contains. It could be sand, or water, or jewellery, or dust, or air, or none of these. Nothing appears to come out when it is tipped on its side.



I took more photographs the following day in daylight, but also in the light of a torch. The following two images show the darkness inside the jug looking the same, but the container appearing a very different colour in different lights, rather a chameleon adapting to its surroundings. To me depicts the fragility of the egoic self can change at different times and in different situations, particularly as emotions change.





Then I tried shining a torch inside to examine the darkness. Light and the shadow were revealed. To me this captured something of the experience of meditation and opening to noticing experientially what was present on in the inner space when the mind stills enough to notice it. It reminded me too of John O'Donohue's poem:

'Blessing for an Artist at the start of the day' by John O'Donohue[5] (excerpt)



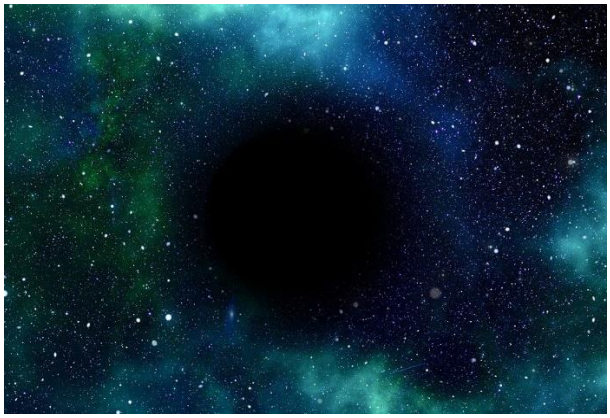
May this be a morning of innocent beginning,
When the gift within you slips clear
Of the sticky web of the personal
With its hurt and its hauntings,
And fixed fortress corners,
A morning when you become a pure vessel
For what wants to ascend from silence …

The glimpses of the light and shadow evoked resonance with the interior world and some sense of emptiness. Bodily it felt expansive, open, visceral, but also containing a sense of apprehension, fear even, unless I could feel sufficiently held. This reminded me how vital it is that the structure of the 'self' as a container, is sufficiently robust to enter into the inner self.

The strength of the container walls: How important it is that we take meditation at the pace that feels right for us whilst still honouring our intention to 'follow the path', taking it very slowly if that feels right. There is no need to look inside if we are not ready to do so. It is more important to make contact with the sensations of the bodily container and feel grounded enough on the floor or chair or cushion and staying connected with our body and our interior space via our breath. Importantly too, it seems that the container walls can only hold their form if they are supported and held in compassion in the process. This is emphasised by contemplative Amy Edelstein[(6)] who teaches mindfulness to adults and children. She recognises the importance of being aware of children's possible traumatic pasts and not expecting them to enter into the vastness of open spaces within themselves. In order to be able to connect with the dark interior, the dualistic self must have experienced sufficient, consistent holding in the connected love and compassion of others, to feel sufficiently safe and stable in the egoic container.

The texture of the emptiness: If I had to describe the texture of the emptiness, it would be a visceral sense of vastness or infinite depth, like space or ocean. Edelstein offers a meditation exercise in which she invites the listener to visualise themselves in a beautiful place, at night, lying on the ground, looking up at the stars. After focusing on the stars, she invites examination of the space between the stars. This vast black 'nothingness' might feel overwhelming, but what made the difference to me was the sense of being in a place of beauty and being held by the ground.





It reminded me of Thomas Merton's[(7)] text in the final paragraphs of 'New Seeds of Contemplation' in which he describes a scene of spiritual awakening and how '… at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the "newness," the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance. For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness.'

The Universe Within: The sense of vastness and depth also seems to connect with Ilia Delio's[(8)] profound explication of the 'two universes of space' and the dimensions of consciousness and love. She says: 'We can begin to speak of biological life and cosmic life as having an inner and outer dimension, the inner dimension built on consciousness and the outer dimension based on love.' She refers to Teilhard de Chardin's work in which she says: 'he spoke of evolution as the rise of withinness and withoutness' … 'As life is proceeding from simple to more complex, it's developing a greater depth – a greater degree of consciousness, at the same time as the degrees of relationship, love, are increasing. This rise of withinness and withoutness, he saw as constituting the whole; … religious experience is not just a human phenomenon, but seems to be part of the inside story of the universe itself. The whole universe seems to have an active self-transcendence to it.

Listening to our body's knowing: Following bodily intuition on a yoga mat to explore self-emptying, I was drawn to bow down in child's pose or a Muslim prayer pose on knees with head to floor. To me, this seemed to all point to humility. As Thomas Merton[(9)] writes:

"At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness, which is untouched by sin and by illusion; a point of pure truth; a point or a spark which belongs entirely to God; which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind, or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak, his name written in us, as our poverty, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere. The paradox of humility is that although there is no program for this seeing, the willingness to be perpetually humbled is a path that heightens our vulnerability to realising this nothingness, which is paradoxically, the very fullness of God manifested in us."



Preparation for Meditation: Let us take a moment now to reflect and be still.

Be still and know I am God.
Be still and know I am.
Be still and know.
Be still.

When you are ready, you may wish to move or stretch as you need to, and find a position that allows as much inner space as possible in your inner body. Perhaps take your attention to your feet and gently move your toes and then your fingers. Now bringing your attention to your breath, you might notice the expansion of your chest and stomach rises on the in breath, and gentle full release on the out breath. If you have a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, in time with the breath, knowing that you can always return to your sacred word or your breath as your mind wanders.



Meditation for 25-minutes.

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.

Resources: Pictures from Pixabay.com / author

(1) Rohr, R. (2017) trinity 'Daily Meditation, Self Emptying: Kenosis'
(2) Wisdom centre meditations June 2020 and September 2020
(3) Finley, J. and Myss, C. (2009*). Transforming Trauma: A Seven Step Process for Spiritual Healing* [Audio CDs]. Louisville: Sounds True, Inc.
(4) Rohr, R. Small self https://cac.org/the-illusion-of-the-separate-self-2020-09-01/
(5) O'Donohue, J. (2007). 'Benedictus: A Book of Blessings'. London: Bantom Press.
(6) Edelstein, A. (2018). 'Transformation Through Mindfulness Practice: an Omega Center Interview' Youtube
(7) Merton, T. (1961). 'New Seeds of Contemplation'
(8) Delio, I. (2017). 'The Universe Within' YouTube
(9) Merton, T. (1968). 'Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander' (Image Books), 158.



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